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Meu Meu!

Crazy Cat's Night



電擊文庫



<Heehahahaha! Welcome to this happy damned dump of an island!

It's been a while! Or is it nice to meet you?

Today, we're airing a cat-and-mouse documentary!

A little game of tag between children who were abandoned into rathood and
a girl who made herself into the island's cat!

Although the rats are never 'it', they're still nibblin' away at the hearts of the
high-and-mighty humans!

Will the cat manage to protect her master, the island itself? Heehahahaha!>

Mew Mew!

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The Eastern District's Guard Team **—the words of Spring-heeled Joplin, the Observer**

Welcome! Welcome, friends! Welcome to this subtly off, tarnished, beautiful, and truly endlessly lovable world!

Would this be your first time on the island? Then the first thing you all must do is secure your own safety!

I am Joplin, the Observer. Not to brag, but as the Observer who has seen countless ways to survive on this island, I thought I should give you some pointers.

Newcomers like you might as well ask an organization for protection. What, you don't believe there's groups like that around? Fine, fine. Here's some proof.

Check out this video! It's from a camera hidden on the Eastern District boss's collar.

Black suit: I *told* ya not to make Jun cry, Boss!

Girl with bangs: *sniff* I-it's okay, Mr. Zhang...

Black suit: How the hell could you write '肉' on her precious wanted poster of Inui?!

???: Sorry, I was feeling a bit jealous. Better than writing '骨'¹, though.

Black suit: What are you, *eight*?

What do you think? Talk about cozy and domestic! They typically do bodyguard work for bigwigs, but they're cool enough people to protect folks like you if you've got the cash.

What, you don't trust 'em? You don't get how a buncha punks like them can protect people on this island? *Wrong!* Too bad. Circle. Shooting blanks. In onomatopoeia, *bzzt*. Sucks for you. Fuck off. Hah! Just kidding. I was just messing with you. Sorry.

I *told* you, this island's *off*. Trying to judge everything by your standards? That's no good. No good at all.

¹ A parody of the extremely popular manga 'Kinnikuman', where the main character has the character '肉' ('meat', but referring to muscle) on his forehead. '骨' is the character for 'bone'.

I mean, I bet the guy in black's the only one you thought was worth the money.

I bet you thought he's the leader.

Ahahahahahahaha!

Wrong. You're still chained by your own standards.

All right, all right. I'll tell you.

About the 'guard cat' that lives on this island.

The story of an adorable, soft, and slightly misbehaved little kitten with claws that shred everything they touch.

That's right. It was just about when the casino opened up in the Eastern District...



Rats

—the words of Yakumo Amagiri, the Killer Ghoul

Sorry. I'm actually the Killer Ghoul.

So I think I'm going to kill you.

I don't know why you were sniffing around like that, but to be honest... it bothered me. The way you were mousing around me.

Although if you were a rodent like Nejiro, I might have spared you.

Hm? You've never heard of him? I see. You're new to this island, aren't you.

Nejiro is king over the rats on this island.

They're such tiny little rats. Those children, you know, are everywhere.

It's a little different from being able to go anywhere. Me and people like Yua can get anywhere, but those rats are different.

Those rats, you see, are *everywhere*. That's the important part. I'm emphasizing the *everywhere* because it's most important.

They spread into every corner of the city to nibble away at people and even the island itself. They're some of the more annoying things around here. Although they're no problem for me.

Their eyes look completely empty, but at the same time they're like mirrors. They reflect their leader Nejiro's eyes. Sad and lonely, but unable to see that that's what they look like themselves.

I can't say I know what they're thinking. Just like you don't understand a Killer Ghoul like me, I don't understand rats.

But it's strange. They look like rodents to me, so I never get the urge to kill them.

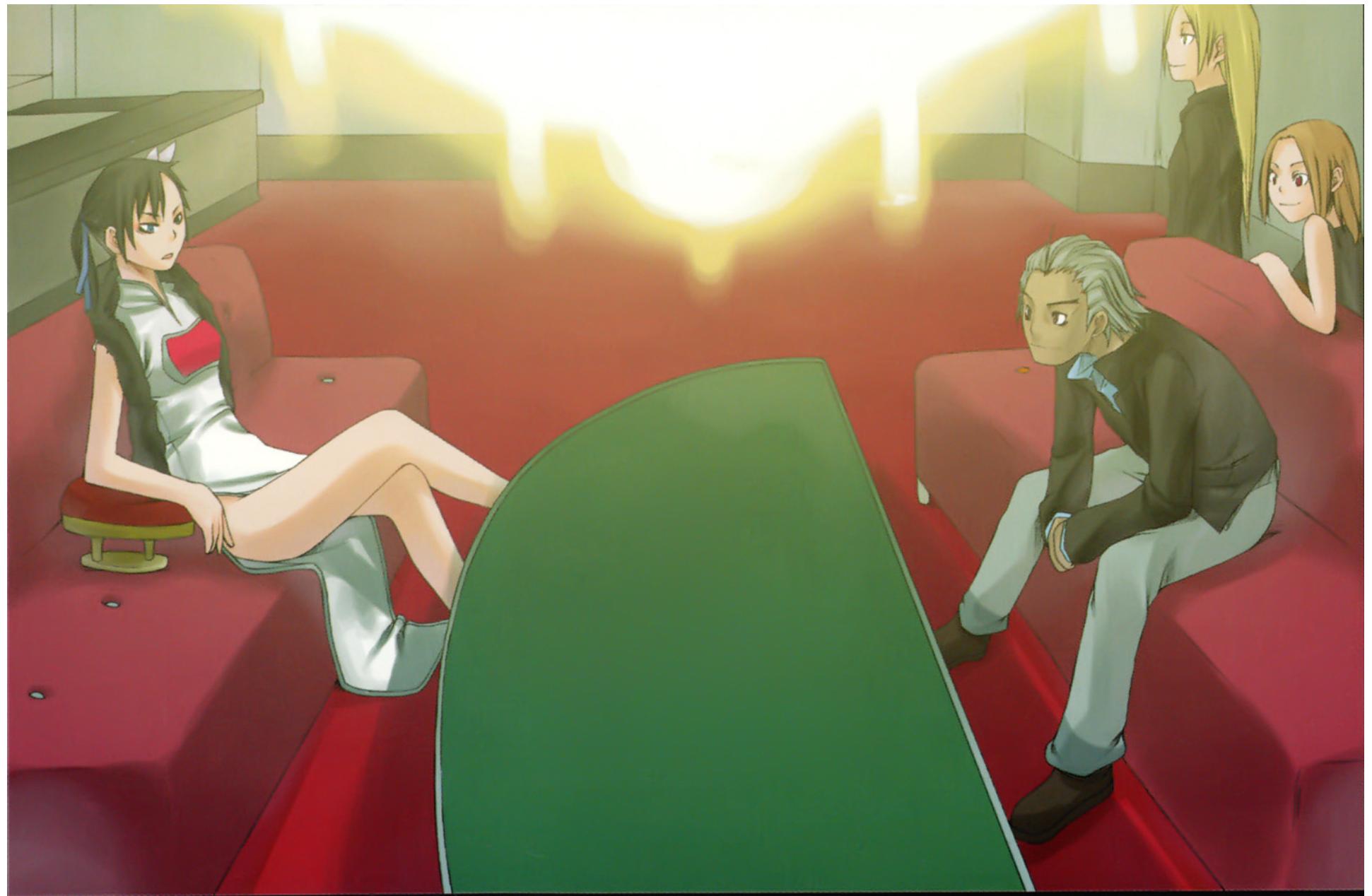
Ghouls kill people, not animals.

All right. I'll tell you.

The legend behind the poor, sweet rats that nest on this island.

You should pray that I change my mind while I talk. That I change my mind about killing you.

That's right. It was just about when the casino opened up in the Eastern District...



The Rulers

—the words of Takeshishi Kanjuro of the ramen shop

So what're you snooping around for?

I mean, I don't care s'long as you pay for the ramen. But lemme at least talk to myself or something. It's for your own benefit.

The folks on this island are basically trash beyond help. Including me.

Just like Uenoshima by Tokyo used to be a dump. This is an island of human trash.

The trash just ended up drawing more trash, and eventually they split into district like East and West and caused a ruckus.

We used to have a North and South not too long ago, but all the groups just chomped away at each other until we just had the mountains East and West left standing.

What? You wanna know who's at the top of those mountains? You're outta your mind. Why're you replying to something I'm saying to myself?

All right. Lemme keep talkin' to myself.

The boss in the Western District's some guy named 'Ei'. But the real movers and shakers are the executives. We don't even know if this Ei guy's on the island or not.

I know about one of the execs—this woman named Yili, who's essentially the head honcho over West. She's a shrewd one, that. If you stumble around like someone who got caught by Yakumo, you'd end up with a new pair of cement shoes. Unlike Yakumo, she doesn't let her whims tell her what to do.

The boss over East acts like he knows exactly what you're thinking. He's even worse than Yili. He'd know what a cockroach or a rat is thinking if it lived on this island. Cause he's basically a house-sized rat himself. A freak, if I ever saw one.

They're the trashiest of trash there is. King and Queen Trash. They meet more 'trash' prerequisites than anyone else. Which means they're the most human people on the island.

You already know that people are made up of 90% trash.

Let me just tell you the whole thing while I'm at it. About the two top idiots who sold all their their souls and lives and pasts to the island.

That's right. It was just about when the casino opened up in the Eastern District...



Mew Mew!

Crazy Cat's Night

Prologue: The Future - Legends

Phuket, Thailand. Patong Beach.

The beach was crawling with tourists under the blazing sun that summer day.

Though it wasn't as crowded as Japan's beaches, where there were more people than there was water, Patong Beach was not lacking for energy.

Visitors from all over the world melded into the captivating scenery enclosed in the Andaman Sea.

The beach was filled with many people of many backgrounds, as though they had been on the island from the very beginning.

"Huh? No way, you Japanese too? Man, talk about nostalgic! Yeah, I was there until just half a year ago!"

There was a food stand in the middle of the beach, full of tourists.

A man with rainbow-tinted hair grinned as he chattered amicably with the man next to him.

"Then again, I guess you can't really call that Japan. I mean, it's *in* Japan, but it's not *part* of it. You know about it? Everyone does. Y'know. That big-ass bridge between Sado Island and Niigata. The one they never finished! You heard about the artificial island in the middle? I used to live there for a while."

The Japanese man, who seemed to be a tourist, gave the rainbow-haired man a curious look.

"They just left it there before they finished, so thugs and illegal immigrants started flockin' to the place. What do people call it now? 'The Island Abandoned by Japan', 'The Extraterritorial Island', 'Dump Island', 'The real island of dreams'..."

As though recalling a distant hometown, the man put on a lonely smile and began to tell his story.

"Sure the place is a dump, but it's a damn good place for someone like me to live. Y'know, how normal people like you treat the island like a legend? But once you get used to the shit, there's nothing better in the whole goddamned country."

The rainbow-haired man tipped his glass, boasting of his past.

"A legend. Yeah. That's the perfect word. The whole island's turned into a legend like the Kowloon Walled City. Now, I pulled some crazy shit on that island, but there's actually a lot of living legends there. Just like a movie!"

The Japanese man urged his new friend for details, curious.

"Hm. You wanna know 'bout the legends? Let's see..."

The rainbow-haired man looked up and thought for a moment. Then, after placing an order for more beer and snacks, began to narrate as though telling history.

"First up is the strongest man on the island. Souji Kuzuhara, the head of the volunteer cops! One serious badass, swear to god. It's like nothing is average about this guy. He deflects bullets with his hand. Can you believe that? Hey, don't give me that look. Then again, I don't blame you for being skeptical."

Getting into the groove of storytelling, the rainbow-haired man chuckled and began to tell the many legends of the island.

As though bragging about his own family, he did not know when to end the waves of legendary exploits.

"If you're just thinking *power*, there's Greatest Zhang—he's the champ in the underground wrestling ring. Hand-to-hand, he's on Kuzuhara's level—he might even be stronger if it's pro wrestling. Then again, fighting on the ring's totally different from fighting off the ring.

"Guns? There's Carlos. Almost made the Olympics, that guy.

"If you're talking strong *and* dangerous, there's Spring-heeled Joplin, the living urban legend. And—

"The strongest, baddest of them all. Yakumo Amagiri, the Killer Ghoul. He almost got me, too. Got away by the skin of my teeth, but I had the devil's luck that day.

"Other than fighting skill? There's this girl named Yua who tried to make a map of the entire island on her own. Nah, half the island's a total maze now cause the bums who live there keep renovating the place. And unlike amusement parks, there ain't any employees there to bail you out if you get lost.

"Buruburu Airwaves! That's the island's very own radio station. The babe who runs it is this weirdo named Kelly. Nah, you wouldn't get it if you didn't see her in person.

"Then there's the legendary pickpocket, Grandpa G. The G-Pick for short. Apparently he's never lost in 50 years. Dunno *what* he's never lost at, but don't ya think it's pretty crazy how he lives off of pickpocketing on an island of poor-ass bums? He got me about three times, too.

"Old man Take's tonkotsu ramen is a legend of its own.

"Ah, right. There's the boss of the Eastern District. He's a real wacko, that one. Huh? Oh. See, the island's divided into a bunch of Districts. There's an organization controlling each district, but they're all pretty shady folks. It's a big headache. I ended up here cause I picked a fight with a Western District exec. Talk about stupid."

Though the rainbow-haired man laughed self-deprecatingly, he showed no sign of regret or frustration.

"Who else...ah, I remember."

After a short pause, he burst out laughing.

"Almost forgot this one. The island's adorable kitten. The sweet pussycat who got to the island first, hunting down the rats taking over the joint."

Chewing on a snack, the man began to tell the story of a certain legend.

"She's whimsical and misbehaved, but you just can't leave her alone. Just lookin' at her makes you want to scratch the back of her neck. Although her claws are something else. Nah, not *metaphorically*. I'm talking *literally*.

"Cause her claws're actually—"

Prologue: The Past - The Cat

Brrrrrrm.

Brrrrrrrrrrrm.

BRRRRRRRRRRRRRM.

The sea breeze and the rumbling of engines filled the island as construction vehicles roared everywhere.

And at the center of the island she sat, her eyes gently closed.

She was quite young—still only in elementary school, from the way she looked.

With her arms wrapped around her knees and her face looking up, she slept.

As though the rumbling that shook the island was nothing more than a soothing lullaby.

Perhaps the term ‘island’ did not fit the place where she slept.

A dull grey mass expanded inorganically outward. Construction machinery was everywhere on the flat, measured land, and materials were stacked in endless piles.

Though the materials were to be turned into the buildings on the island, the countless steel beams almost looked like piles of rubble.

Because only the construction vehicles brought in by ship were on the island, the street that passed through the center of the island had neither traffic lights nor guardrails. But once the island was completed, it would be the best road on the entire facility.

“From here, it looks just like the reclaimed land in Odaiba.” A man in work wear standing in the middle of the crossroad muttered to himself, looking down the street.

The tire-marked street seemed to run forever, but the blue seas unfolded just as the road reached the horizon.

The man, who was almost middle-aged, turned slightly.

"But that'll change once the island is finished. With the Etsusa Bridge as the turning point, Niigata, Sado, and even Japan's economy will improve instantly."

"Hah hah. That's a very bold claim," replied a suit-clad man standing next to him. "Mr. Sahara, you're almost sounding like an *Ishin-shishi*² patriot."

"Heh. So I'm being conceited, now?" The man in work wear replied with a chuckle, sounding like an ordinary salaryman. "Then again, I suppose it's not something a construction manager is really qualified to say. That's for higher-ups like you, Mr. Kirino."

"Please, I'm only an architect. This bridge and the island carry the hopes of everyone involved—equally," Kirino replied. Sahara gave a toothy grin, embarrassed.

"I suppose that's true. Once they're finished, I'll have more than enough to brag about to my daughter."

He slowly turned to a pile of materials nearby.

Kirino followed his gaze and saw a small truck parked there.

The engine was on, and in it the girl sat hugging her knees. In the din of noise, she alone seemed to be cocooned in silence.

Her face was pointed upwards, but she seemed to be asleep. Kirino watched her curiously, then turned to the construction manager.

"That would be your daughter, then?"

"That's right. She begged me to take her along so she could see, but she fell asleep. Damn. People always say she acts like a borrowed cat³, but now she's really curled up like a kitten wrapped up in blankets."

² Japanese political activists from the late Edo period.

³ An idiom referring to someone who remains alone and reserved even in the midst of a lively crowd.

Sahara's tone was a little rough, but there was a loving look in his eyes.

He then changed the subject, turning to Kirino.

"Come to think of it, didn't you say you had a daughter, too? Why not bring her over so she can watch her father in action?"

"Ah, my daughter's still a bit young for that. It's too dangerous to bring her on site, but my wife is taking good care of her, and they're watching from the mainland." Kirino said, also laughing proudly, and looked in the same direction as Sahara.

On the southern side of the island, they could see the mountains of the mainland and the sea between, and the cityscape on the shore.

The foundations of the massive bridge dotted the gap between the mainland and the artificial island.

"I see... so they're watching from there." Sahara said, fixing his helmet awkwardly.

"Then we'll just have to make sure they get to visit the place someday. Put our backs into it and finish up this island."

The architect nodded silently. Sahara began to walk toward the work site.

"I can't wait. Until the day children our daughters' age chuckle together on this island we built."

"I'm not so sure about 'chuckle', but I feel the same." Kirino said with a wry grin, looking over the island once more.

The world's largest, longest bridge, was to stretch between Niigata and Sado.

And at the center of the bridge would be the artificial island. On that as-of-yet unnamed structure, the men dreamed of a brighter future.

Like fathers watching their children grow.

At the center of the island, the construction manager's daughter remained cut off from the world around her.

Even in the din of noise, she was as docile as a borrowed cat.

So long as the engines continued to rumble, the girl's state of peace remained unbroken.

Until the moment the commotion spread, cutting short the sound of construction on the island, she continued to entrust herself to the rumbling air.

Even to the moment of her father's death.

Even when her father was pulled into the massive engine that formed the core of the island.

And time passed—

Prologue: The Present - Rats

Summer, 2020. Just above the Pits in the Western District.

"See? He's already dead." Said a boy, looking down at an unmoving old man.

The boy was not yet 15 years old, his face still quite innocent. He looked around at the children around him with an indifferent mask.

"I told you, didn't I? I win the bet."

There were four or five of them gathered together. In the dim concrete passageway, the children relaxed in whatever ways were most comfortable.

As though closing in on the fresh corpse, they drew near. The old man was still warm, and he stank of something other than rot.

Blood.

The old man was bleeding everywhere—there wasn't quite a flood, but the blood was forming visible pools around him.

Watching it unfold, the girls whispered.

"How'd he die?"

"Blood loss?"

"He got beaten with a lead pipe, so maybe cranial trauma?"

"Or old age."

"No way."

The boys began to whisper, then.

"How long'd it take?"

"About 14 minutes."

"So Nejiro's the only winner."

"Was he the only one who guessed he'd die in less than 15 minutes?"

Though they had witnessed death, the children did not show any sign of fear or compassion. There were no smiles on their lips, but from the way they spoke it almost sounded like they were entertained.

"Old people are really weak. Don't you think, Nejiro?" One of the boys wondered. The skinny boy called Nejiro replied.

"He wasn't weak because he was old. People in general are just much weaker than we expect."

A beat. Then he added,

"Especially the people on this island."

Nejiro did not seem very healthy himself, with his pale complexion. The children around him seemed much the same.

To exaggerate slightly, the dead man looked healthier than the children around him.

Though the children were surrounding the corpse, they were not the ones who had killed the man. The old man was a local of the artificial island, but he had been caught up in a fight with a group of punks new to the city, and ended up being beaten to death. The punks had shown him no compassion; they had swung planks and pipes at the man several times older than they were without even blinking.

Watching the old man lay there moaning, his belongings looted, the children did nothing. Instead of helping him up or putting him out of his misery, they whispered amongst themselves as they made bets on whether or not he would survive, or how long it would take for him to die.

Not knowing just how cruel their actions were.

Or perhaps they knew their own cruelty well.

The old fluorescent lightbulb above their heads flickered with a noise. As if on cue, one of the girls turned her dull eyes to Nejiro.

"What do we do with the body? It'll smell if we leave it here," she wondered. The boy next to Nejiro chimed in.

"This is the Western District. The volunteer police'll take care of it." He said, his eyes staring nowhere.

Nejiro spoke, his gaze also directed at no one.

"You think? ...I heard their leader Kuzuhara's not on the island right now."

"Oh, right."

"The volunteer police are a bunch of weaklings without Kuzuhara."

With a surprisingly mature assessment, the children went silent.

The air was heavier. The temperature on their skin was icy.

Aboveground, the summer sun was probably warming up the ground and the air. But underground, near the Pits, the air was surprisingly frigid. Perhaps it was all the unnecessary air conditioning on the aboveground level; the chill gradually robbed the boys and girls of their heat.

Yet the children did not even flinch. Not for death, not for the air, and not even for their own positions.

The light flickered again. Nejiro turned, and without sparing a glance at the body or his companions, headed for the nearest staircase.

Then, he looked over his shoulder with one final conclusion.

"Even if no one takes care of it now, I'm sure even the slower ones will do something once it starts to smell. Or maybe someone else will do it before that. All we have to do is avoid this area until then."

His mechanical voice, the intonation restrained to its limits, slightly shook the chilling air.

"I see."

"You're right."

The other children showed no emotion to his conclusion.

With equally mechanical replies, they stirred after Nejiro.

Like a pack of lemmings bound for a cliffside.



They had climbed up several winding flights of stairs when Nejiro suddenly opened his mouth. Without even slowing his pace he spoke in a monotone.

"Our bonds are strong. Nothing can break us."

It was a line straight out of a passionate *shounen* manga, but the boy's tone remained as neutral as ever as he continued to live out his indifference.

There was something resembling surrender in the way he said the word 'bonds'. As though he had no choice but to accept the word.

Eventually, the children reached the top landing aboveground.

Stopping in front of a door at a dead end, Nejiro brought up an unusual metaphor.

"...This 'ship' won't stay afloat for long. It might even be sinking already. And we've been forced aboard it."

And finally, he seemed to change. His tone shook faintly, betraying the sudden surge of emotion in his heart.

Was he speaking to his companions behind him? Or to himself?

"That's why we're going to get out of here. To survive. That's why we joined forces and swore to live as one. Right?"

His tone quickened as he spoke. His gaze grew sharper.

"That's why...we gave ourselves a name. 'Rats'. We're going to escape this sinking ship. We just want to survive."

Nejiro was not the only one who began to show emotion. The other children, who had been listening as though they were inanimate objects, slowly began to react to his voice.

"Is that right?"

"That's right."

"Yeah."

"Are we running away?"

"We're running away."

"Where?"

"Anywhere but here."

"What's there?"

"Is there something that's not here?"

"I'm sure there is."

"What?"

"Can we be happy?"

"I think so."

"What's that mean?"

"Have you ever felt happy before?"

"You just know it from a dictionary, right?"

"I know we're not happy right now."

"There's no way kids like us can ever be happy."

"I bet 'happy' is outside the island."

"The people who abandoned us must have taken it away when they left."

"Taken what?"

"Happy."

"That's stupid."

"Can we even survive outside the island?"

"But if Nejiro says we can..."

"We might be able to."

"I bet we will."

"We will."

"Let's."

"Yeah."

"Let's survive."

There was nothing childlike about their conversation, but the conversation was not mature.

Though they were speaking Japanese, the sequence of words was something not quite human.

The children were not lethargic; they were simply indifferent to everything but themselves.

With the undirected whispers of his companions at his back, Nejiro slowly took hold of the doorknob.

"Where we're going, we'll be able to find happiness. I know we will. That's why we're running away. To the great big world where the people who abandoned us on this trashy island are."

An unpleasant, rusted screech echoed down the stairwell. At the same time, a bright orange light illuminated the children's faces.

It was evening. The blinding sunlight seemed to pierce their very eyes.

"And to get there, we'll nibble through everything. From sacks of rice to human hearts."

And as though to himself, the boy repeated:

"Everything."

Silent in unison, they filed out the door.

They were on the roof of a small building. The moment they stepped outside, the ocean breeze and the boiling heat encapsulated them. The children had to blink rapidly because of the sudden temperature change.

"It must have been months since I last came outside." Nejiro said to himself, looking out at his surroundings from behind the railings.

The beautiful decorations and the staggering electric lighting on the streets had long been broken beyond function.

The grubby grey jungle was almost post-apocalyptic to behold, but there were signs of life in every corner.

Countless wires suspended between broken windows, and the laundry hanging out to dry from them.

The hand-assembled houses that crowded half-finished buildings.

The scent of dinner and the white smoke that accompanied it wafting over the city.

Incandescent and halogen lamps shining like Christmas lights from behind the windows of ruined buildings.

And—the sound of generators working to keep those lights going.

It was like countless people had been stuffed into living spaces, left to churn to and fro.

Again and again, like a shot out of a nature documentary.

"This."

Peering down from the roof, Nejiro tightened his grip on the railings.

"*This* is the world they gave us?"

He unleashed his emotions in an instant. There was clearly a smile on his face, but the voice that spoke those words was trembling.

"As if."

"Yeah."

The boys also laughed.

"Hah hah hah."

"You're right."

The girls also laughed.

Listening to the chorus of monotonous laughter, Nejiro put on a fake smile of his own and slowly raised his head, burning a certain image into his eyes.

The image of the world's largest over-sea bridge, stretching through the center of the island from north to south.

And the endless ocean before them, surrounding the filthy city.

In spite of the many hopes and dreams piled upon it, the island was never completed.

Though it was a world away from the work its creators wanted to make,

There was still laughter.

The children were laughing.

Their faces completely blank.

On and on they chuckled.

It was neither the mainland nor the island.

It was Japan, yet not.

It was neither land nor sea.

The longest bridge in the world, spanning Sado Island and Niigata.

The nameless artificial island that stood in the very middle of that bridge—

第1章
『チューンソーキャット』



Chapter 1: Chainsaw Cat

Wednesday morning, mid-July. Somewhere in the Eastern District.

Brrrrrrrrm. Brrrrrrrrrm.

Brrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrm.

Off-kilter vibrations shook the morning streets.

The sound of generators spinning their rusting motors.

The sound of the reddened saw at the butcher shop cutting through frozen chunks of pork.

The sound of a motorcycle's engine spinning idly.

The sound of a dusty air conditioning unit struggling to circulate air.

The sound of an ancient washing machine rattling and splashing.

All kinds of vibrations tangled together to shake the air of the city.

And in that endless resonance of noise, she slept like a baby.

The room was by no means large, with tools and electronics heaped together like rubble. The young woman was sprawled out in her underwear as though filling the gaps.

She was probably not yet 20. Her long bangs covered her closed eyes. And though she had an attractive figure, there was something childlike in her sleeping face.

It was past nine in the morning, but sunlight would never enter the room. It wasn't that the windows were covered—only that the light from outside was artificial.

Overhead outside was not a blue sky, but a ceiling of concrete. The young woman's smooth, fair skin reflected the cold fluorescent light on the ceiling.

And just as she stirred, the cell phone lying on the floor began to ring.

The ringtone was a song from a decades-old slasher flick about a madman who killed people while wearing human skin. It was a poor fit for the girl's looks, and if she had to fit the film's setting somehow, she would probably work best as the victim.

"Mmm..."

Opening her eyes at the melody filling the room, the girl reached over to the cell phone a slight distance away. Though she had pale skin her slender arm did not look particularly frail.

Taking the call, she replied in a drowsy voice.

"Yawn...hello?"

<Slept in again, you lummox?!>

"Eek?!"

The girl flinched.

Her hazy consciousness instantly cleared as she righted herself with the force of a jack-in-the-box.

"M-Mr. Zhang! Yes? Wait, huh? What's a lummox?"

<Shaddap and wake up, Jun Sahara! Your shift's started ages ago, so why the hell is the first thing I hear a yawn? Well? Get off your rear! Brush your teeth, eat your breakfast, put on some clothes, and get your ass over here on the double!>

"Ahh, yes! Okay!"

Her eyes began to spin again.

The girl named Jun Sahara did not wait for the man to continue. She hung up, and with a yawn, breathed something like a sigh.

"Uhh..."

Tears streamed from her eyes. They had probably come from her yawn earlier, but she still felt like crying.

"...Wait. Today's Wednesday. Don't I have the day off?" She wondered, and turned to the calendar hanging from her door.

It was definitely Wednesday—she had Wednesdays off—

"...Oh..."

Noticing the irregularity on the calendar, she moaned.

Today's date was circled in red, and in the space below the date were written the words 'Go to work today!'.

"How could I forget...?"

Jun had completely forgotten about it and chatted with her friend Misaki over the phone until the previous last night. It was clearly her own mistake. Normally, she would have struggled to vent her anger, but this time she blankly folded her blankets without looking particularly anxious.

Then she stood up and began to move, heading off to do her business.

Though she had only just woken up, her fair skin was already shimmering. Her eyes were still covered by her bangs, but her nose and mouth hinted at her attractive features.

She was very calm for someone who had been so badly chewed out—there was no wasted movement in her actions. In several minutes she had changed and was opening the refrigerator as she fixed her sleeves. She took out a pouch of nutritional jelly from the door and sucked on it as she walked.

Though quick, there was nothing rushed in the way she moved.

Other than the mess of junk around her blankets, the room was quite clean. Jun crossed the room again and again as she prepared to leave, covering the shortest distance possible each time.

Her short hair was clearly brushed, but her bangs still covered her eyes. Yet it didn't seem to obstruct her vision as she didn't try to push it aside.

After putting on a well-cut leather suit, she put on pants instead of a skirt. Inside her opened jacket she only wore a T-shirt, allowing glimpses of her attractive curves. But Jun did not care about such things; she was dressed in a way that allowed her great freedom of movement.

When the jelly pouch was empty, she tossed it in a trash can and muttered a word of thanks even though no one was there to hear.

Finally ready to set out, she grabbed something unusual at the door.

Two long leather bags were leaning by the door. They looked like baseball bat pouches, but two sizes thicker.

Straps were attached to either end of each pouch. Jun slung both over her shoulders; they looked like small cannons on her back. It was jarring to behold, but Jun did not seem to mind. She opened her locked door and stepped outside.

At first glance, it looked like she was in an underground shopping mall.

From the layout alone the area was indeed a shopping mall. To be specific, it was once meant to be one.

People traversed the corridors and opened up shop in their own little corners, making it hard to believe they were underground. Unlike a normal shopping mall, it was like an aboveground slum had been transplanted into a basement.

But the graffiti-riddled ceiling overhead turned the atmosphere of the city on its head. And it was not only above—walls, the floor, and the shutters of stores that had yet to open were filled to every last corner with graffiti.

It was different from the way young people in cities left gang symbols on walls. The graffiti here was mostly scribbles.

Most of the scribbles were written in Japanese, and though 80% of the people walking down the street were Japanese, the city was completely different from any region in Japan.

"Oh, Mr. Take. Good morning..."

"Mornin', Jun."

When Jun came outside, the owner of the ramen place next door was preparing to open up shop. They saw each other almost every day, but perhaps it was her personality—or the man's intimidating face—that Jun often found herself cowering before him.

Jun, the owner of the ramen shop, and everyone who had a business or home in the neighborhood was there illegally.

If things had gone according to plan, this area would have been the biggest shopping mall in the Hokuriku area. But it had become a den of illegal residents.

How had such a thing happened?

What was this place?

Those might be the questions on the minds of anyone who set foot here without doing their research.

But no one came to this city without the answers to those questions.

There were many ways to reach the island. One could walk across the bridge from Sado or Niigata. Naturally, the entrances to the bridge were sealed off and heavily guarded by the police.

Another way was to take a boat. There were several professional transporters who undertook such jobs using motorboats or fishing boats. The only downside was that they cost a fortune, and that passengers were likely to be robbed of everything they owned the moment they came ashore, abandoned on the island by the transporter. And as going to the island was illegal, the victims could not even go to the police for help after that.

Above all, the island had been abandoned by the law-governed nation of Japan. There was no guarantee that someone who had lost everything on the island would make it back alive.

In other words, those who came to the island were people who had no choice but to escape there, or young people and journalists who visited out of curiosity.

Or—

"Look what we have here."

"Hey babe. Heh. Let's be honest here. You're done."

—people like these.

As Jun headed for work on the same route she always took, people approached her in a deserted stretch of the path.

It was in a stairwell leading aboveground that a group of young men seemed to materialize out of a background of graffiti, getting in her way.

"...?"

Momentarily confused, Jun widened her hidden eyes and looked around.

There were six or seven of them.

A group of young men dressed in ways that flaunted their stupidity had taken charge of the stairwell, and were surrounding Jun.

"Check it out. Betcha she's wondering why we're picking on her."

"Nice. Hey, lemme see your eyes. C'mon."

The young men chattered with no concern for her feelings. Jun knew what they were thinking.

And as though having seen through her, the men continued to ignore her personhood.

"What'd I tell you guys? This chick walks through this empty stairwell every morning."

"Can't believe dumbasses like this still exist."

"C'mon, let's grab her and go."

Jun could only tilt her head at the flow of the conversation.

'*Why are they picking on me, of all people?*'

And with intense curiosity, she opened her mouth. Yet there was no hint of fear or anger in her tone.

"Um...excuse me? Do you...not know about me?"

She paused hesitantly from time to time, but she was not scared.

"What the hell about, you little bitch?" One of the men spat, grabbing Jun by her collar. "We just *said* we know you pass by here every morning. You know what's gonna happen if you don't hold still?"

'Oh, I get it.'

Jun inwardly clapped her hands in understanding.

'These people haven't been on the island long. They just happened to see me and pick me out. If they'd been watching me for a while, they wouldn't have been waiting for me on my day off.'

Realizing that the men were just thugs who were after her money or body, Jun breathed a sigh of relief.

'In other words, they're not work enemies.'

She tried to put a hand on her chest, but one of the men was still holding her collar.

"Um..."

'Could you let go of me?' Jun was about to ask, but in that instant the thug growled.

"What?"

"...No-nothing. I'm sorry." She backed down without thinking, intimidated.

"You got a problem, pussycat? You're in for a world of hurt if you try to fight back... Or you know what? That might be more entertaining. Do your worst."

Jun hung her head apologetically, and mumbled—

"...Okay."

"What?"

A second later, her hand slid back and reached into one of the cylindrical cases behind her.

"Hey! What the—"

The thug's first instinct was to grab her arm, but Jun's movements were utterly efficient. No one had noticed her move until her hand was inside the case.

Was she planning to take out a stun gun, the thugs wondered. They were not naive—even they knew that women in neighborhoods like this armed themselves for protection.

But their confidence that no weapon could beat their numbers ultimately sealed their fate.

The newcomers to the city knew much too little about their new lair.

The object that slipped out from her back was—

"Wha..."

—the thugs could feel their breaths get caught in their throats—

Brrrrrrrrrrrrrrrm.

The growl of a beast echoed through the concrete stairwell.

Realizing where the sound was coming from, the man holding Jun's collar instantly let go and leapt back—but lost his balance and fell on his backside.

The other thugs froze at once, and one of them dropped the cigarette he had in his mouth. He did not even glance at the fallen cigarette as his lips trembled at the sight of Jun's weapon.

The object she had drawn shone an eerie silver; it let out a ghastly howl.

It spun.

And spun.

And spun.

Around the edges of a metal guide bar, a sharpened chain spun like a linear motor car.

Countless spinning blades slipped in and out of the red engine. The weapon was as thin and sharp as a bat.

A modified chainsaw.

"Wha...?"

"A chain...saw...?"

This time, the men were the ones confused. And Jun's expression also changed.

Her apologetic look did a 180, leaving an angelic smile on her face.

Her eyes were still hidden, but she seemed to wish peace on all who saw her.

Perhaps the chainsaw was not as heavy as it looked—she raised it with one arm without a single labored breath. In fact, the chainsaw's engine was much smaller than the standard design, and the long, thin blade almost had the form of a katana.

Holding up her unusual and dangerous toy, Jun introduced herself with a smile.

"Ahem... nice to meet you, everyone. My name is Jun Sahara, the person in charge of guarding the most powerful man in the Eastern District!"

Her earlier awkwardness vanished, giving way to a spirited introduction. As soon as she finished speaking, her chainsaw growled even more loudly.

The roar once more filled the underground, noise bouncing off every wall and stair.

The blades spun mercilessly in the narrow stairwell.

From Jun's perspective, the men were all within cutting range. Some of them had knives in their belts, but they were so cowed by the chainsaw that using the knives didn't even occur to them.

One of the thugs finally came to his senses and swung a lead pipe—but there was a flash of sparks as the pipe was knocked out of his hand.

Before he knew it, the chain was spinning rapidly under his chin. It chipped away at his stubble, punctuating the air with each hair cut.

The man had barely noticed Jun move. Like the wind she had brought the saw to him without a single wasted movement.

The newly shaved man could not even scream. The moment Jun drew back the chainsaw, he wobbled to his knees and lost consciousness.

"You bitch!" One of the thugs howled, pulling a blade from his belt.

It was a gigantic, 30-centimeter knife. If the thug were to use it for anything other than making threats, he would have to prepare himself to kill.

With newfound confidence—owed to the massive weapon, or perhaps the mindset of a cornered rat—the man raised a battle shriek and swung.

But—

"You're slow. ...Hup!"

He swung too far back; in the brief opening, the chainsaw slid near in silence.

Jun had her back turned to the man, and in her left hand was the roaring engine.

And the weapon threatening the man's wrist was the object in Jun's left hand, a chainsaw that had not yet been started. No one noticed that she had taken out the second saw.

There was something almost comical about the way the girl dual-wielded chainsaws. Who in the world would even try such a thing?

But the girl before the thugs was quite real.

Finally drawing their weapons, the men glared warily at the nightmare they faced.

Knives. Stun guns. Modified truncheons. A full collection of thuggish weapons.

Though none of them had guns, they were armed enough to kill a man and then some.

And yet their collective force seemed small and powerless before Jun.

A chainsaw was not a tool for hurting people. But it exuded an air of danger beyond those of knives and stun guns.

As the thugs gulped in unison, Jun alone grinned—not a drop of sweat on her face—and looked around at them cheerfully.

"Ah! So you're still not going to leave!" She hollered over the roar of the engine, trying to see if her foes were still intent on a fight.

The answer came from the thugs' leader, who was still on the floor.

"Wh-wh-what the hell, bastards? Kill the bitch already!" He cried, nearly shrieking. The others moved as if on cue.

Jun also moved.

She simply pulled the black trigger-shaped lever on the chainsaw in her left hand.

The second chainsaw roared to life.

The spinning quickened at the moment of ignition. It was like the chainsaw was customized to allow its wielder to start it single-handedly.

"Eek!"

The thug holding the large knife tried to back away in terror—which was quite understandable, as the chain had begun moving right next to his hand.

"Fuck! What the hell, bi- ARGH!"

The man's screams were overpowered, and just as he stepped back, he hit the wall.

The second layer of vibrations forced even the thugs' hearts to tremble. Lowering their weapons, they stared at their foe with cold sweat covering their backs.

The girl who was until a minute ago their prey had become an enemy—and the moment she started her second chainsaw, she had become a predator.

Almost provocatively, Jun spun as the thugs watched in horror. She twirled like a top and the chainsaws danced just centimeters from the men.

"Aha!"

She laughed cheerfully. Even amidst the echo of the chainsaws, her voice reached the thugs.

But perhaps they were just hearing things.

Beneath her bangs they caught glimpses of euphoria and manic ecstasy.

It almost seemed as though she were in a trance, delivering beauty and fear to the eyes of all who watched.

"Aha! Hey, everyone. Hey hey hey hey."

The moment she drew her chainsaws, Jun had become someone else. As if a second personality had arisen the moment she started the second saw.

"Why did *you* come to this island?"

In spite of her mad grin, her tone remained polite.

But that was what terrified the men most.

She was like a reaper, out to coldly take their lives with a smile.

"Have you come to move this island?"

Her emotions exploded to a high in sync with the roar of her chainsaws. Drawing all that energy into herself, she spoke with a mask of tranquility. Slowing the engines, she continued to question the thugs ecstatically.

"Will you become this island's engines?"

But they could not hear her—not because of the engines, but because they no longer had the ease of mind to listen.

"UAAAAAAAARGH!"

One of the men was pushed to his limit. He charged forward in a bid to escape the fear.

With Jun's back in his sights, he swung his knife—

"Ahahaha! No, no, that's no good!"

—but for some reason, she was facing him.

The moment he noticed her head looking at him, the rest of her body—first the chest and stomach, then her waist—and her arms and the chainsaws followed.

With feline agility, Jun put her whole body into the swing.

There was a deafening screech as chain hit blade, and before sparks flew the man's knife was flung aside.

"Wha-?"

The man was by no means weak, but he could not overpower the weight of the chainsaw, which had been further strengthened by the momentum of centrifugal forces. The only thing left in his hand was an agonizing impact.

Yet Jun did not stop there.

Her arm did not slow—in fact, she swung horizontally as her arm followed her body's movements.

Clang.

The second she swung, a stun gun fell to pieces on the floor.

But Jun still continued. With her weapon in hand, she elegantly made a diagonal turn to the side. It was like the roar of the engines was not powering the chainsaw, but her body.

Each time she spun, one weapon after another fell.

And by the time every weapon had been sent flying, the thugs were frozen.

"Is it over already, everyone?"

Noticing the men, Jun loosened her grip on the trigger and quieted the engine little by little.

"H-hey! Wait, stop! Hold it! Please! We'll do anything! Just let us go! We'll stay away from you, swear to god! Please!" The man on his backside begged, his eyes wild, but Jun smiled.

"...Just me?"

"What?"

"So you're saying that... you'll keep running wild in the Eastern District?"

The moment her eyes narrowed, the engines roared again.

BRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRM.

"Argh! Wait! No!"

"Ahaha! You can ask me to wait all you like, but—"

Shouting over the noise of her chainsaws, Jun passed a death sentence with an angelic smile.

—I'm sorry! These two here are being so loud! I can't hear what you're trying to say! So I can't wait! Ahaha! I'm sorry!"

"You *did* hear it..." The thug pointed out, teary-eyed, but he was drowned out as the engines' roar grew louder.

“Ahaha.”

With an innocent grin, Jun began to shake back and forth.

"You guys! You don't fit on this island! So I'll help you to feel like never coming back here! It's for your own good!"

Jun considerably decided to teach the men a lesson rather than let them go.

But her kindness was overpowered by the sound of her weapons.

The thugs struggled to flee, but the roar of her engines and the shrieking of the chains would not let them escape—

BRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRR—





Aboveground, the Eastern District. An area originally planned as a theme park.

The Etsusa Bridge was the world's largest over-sea bridge.

It was also incomplete, left abandoned due to certain circumstances.

If things had gone according to plan, it would have been by now the biggest tourist destination in the Hokuriku region. But no car had ever traveled down the length of the bridge, and ultimately the bridge was left a ruin before it was even complete.

The bridge itself was relatively unremarkable in that sense, but the problem was with the massive seaborne fortress standing in the middle.

Oversea construction techniques made great advances in the early 21st century, and the artificial island was created with the best of Japan's technology.

The island dwarfed the Umihotaru in Tokyo bay. Plans for the Etsusa Bridge and the island were the nation's most prominent architectural projects at the time.

But thanks to waves of economic recession, failing foreign policies, and accidents during the construction itself, the bridge and the island were abandoned by Japan. And now, people who were likewise cast out of society took themselves there and erected unauthorized buildings, creating a Kowloon Walled City for the modern age.

The artificial island was divided into several levels. There was the aboveground, with its haphazard mix of facilities and residences; the underground, once planned as a shopping mall but now filled to the brim with homes and businesses; and the dangerous yet mysteriously alluring Pits—an area once planned as a parking lot—which was a dump even in comparison to the rest of the city of vagrants. It was said that the Pits were overrun with hopeless thugs and drug addicts, and rumors said that things that could not be found in the higher levels were in abundance there.

The areas other than the Pits—in other words, the ‘higher levels’—were divided into several districts that included both the aboveground and underground levels. Each district was governed by gangs from the mainland, the Chinese mafia, or other illegal organizations that oversaw the transactions that took place. They were in charge of many things, from smaller disputes like mediating the amount of protection fees to be paid in proportion to one’s income, to overseeing dealings with the mainland and every matter related to exercising their privileges. In other words, there was a ‘ruling class’ for each of the districts.

Until the end of the previous year, there had been four districts—one for each cardinal direction. But a lone assassin eliminated the leaders of the Northern and Southern Districts, essentially leaving behind only two—the East and the West. And it was the leaders of those two districts who oversaw everything that happened on the island.

Criminal syndicates on the mainland that were in charge of the Northern and Southern Districts were at the remaining groups’ throats, but the groups ruling East and West did not give them another foothold on the island again.

East and West each had their own office aboveground. The Chinese mafia, which ruled the Western District, had taken over an entire 15-story hotel that had been closed just short of opening day. The multinational mafia of the East had taken over an incomplete theme park and its leisure hotel as its base of operations.

Inside the theme park was an unfinished ferris wheel and rusted roller coasters, lending it a terribly desolate air.

Jun Sahara strode past the gates and stopped in front of her workplace, the park office.

Because the office was located right next to the gates, she could go straight inside without having to look at the ruined park.

If the theme park had been completed, the office too would have been decorated in ways that would make a child’s heart leap—but no such thing existed now. The graffiti-covered walls were supported by metal framework, and sheets of galvanized metal stuck out of the roof for some unknown construction work.

However, the graffiti on the office was different from those on the rest of the island. It was much more intentional, with frightening yet beautiful combinations of stylized faces, dragons, skulls, and distorted letters.

Unfortunately, next to the strangely tasteful graffiti were scribbles like 'Strongest in Hokuriku' or 'Westies better watch their back'—outdated phrases not even delinquent biker gangs used anymore.

The windows were obscured by thick curtains, making it impossible to peek. It was also impossible to hear what was happening inside. It was like the world beyond the door was frozen in time.

Jun hesitated at the door, but eventually nodded, took a deep breath, and grabbed the doorknob.

Bowing deeply, she slowly opened the door.

"Umm... I'm sorry I'm late..."

Her deep breath escaped in a foolish squeak that seemed to hobble across the office.

Jun's enthusiasm from earlier was gone, leaving her as feeble and timid as a frightened baby animal.

The office was a far cry from the dark air outside. It was decorated with pictures, posters, and a wall clock that matched the interior. That, at least, was befitting a place to conduct business, but the fact that the posters mostly featured unusual films ('Double Beretta - Dual guns. Dual planets') and swimsuit-clad women was a bit of a detriment to their credibility.

But none of that reached Jun's eyes because she was hanging her head. And even if they were in her line of sight, the posters would not affect her because she saw them almost every day.

Wondering how her co-workers would react to her tardiness, she hesitantly looked up—

—and saw the soles of someone's feet.

"Wha—"

Something cut through the air as a massive figure passed by her head.

There was an impact.

Jun couldn't even scream at the noise, freezing on the spot instead.

She desperately tried to calm herself and quickly realized what had happened.

And—

"...Eek."

With a feeble scream, she turned to the man who now stood next to her.

The one who landed a spectacular drop kick to the wall by the door was a tall man in black. He seemed unamused by Jun's scream.

"I can't hear ya, Jun. Speak up, why don't you? And sorry 'bout yelling at you over the phone. I was out of line."

"I-if you're feeling sorry, what was that drop kick for...?" Jun pointed out nervously. The cracked concrete wall behind her was making unnerving noises. Was it already old to begin with, or had it been cracked because of the kick? It scared her more to think about it, so she decided to stop there.

"If I wasn't gonna apologize, I'd have landed it on your face."

"Eek..."

"And if I was still angry, I'd have smashed you against the door."

Jun could not respond. She wanted to think he was joking, but Zhang—the man in black—showed no hint of humor on his face. They went over to a corner of the office as they continued their terrifying conversation.

There were just enough desks in the office to make it look like a conference room, and 15 men and women were gathered there. Each was dressed in his or her own distinctive style, with Zhang and Jun being the only ones in suits. Even Jun herself was not wearing a completely ordinary suit, however.

"You're late, captain."

The people in plainclothes snickered as Jun came over.

This ragtag group of men and women were the Guard Team of the organization that oversaw the Eastern District.

They were the executives' shields and bullets—an elite force that devastated their enemies.

At least, that was what the recruitment posters on the wall said.

And from the sounds of the team's conversation, the ever-nervous Jun Sahara was their leader. Supporting that claim were the words on the poster

'Want to be our captain? Take part in our monthly rock-paper-scissors tournament!'

It looked like a bad joke, but the posters were plastered on the walls of the Eastern District—aboveground, underground, and even in the Pits. And it was absolutely true that this laughable group was the Eastern District's personal guard team.

But the name 'Guard Team' was just that—a name. The members also ran errands for executives, did odd jobs, and sometimes maintained a balance of power against enemy organizations. They were more accurately the Eastern District's personal mercenaries.

At times, they even took on dirty work like assassination. But the Eastern District's executives were known for being dovish, and Jun had never personally been given such orders.

"Um...I...I'm sorry, everyone." She said, bowing again and again. But the others smiled.

"It's not like this never happens. Don't sweat it, Jun."

A man with a mohawk gestured for her to raise her head. A handsome man with blue shades and brown skin chimed in, leaning against the wall.

"Still. It took you a while to get here after Zhang called," the Spanish man said in fluent Japanese. The Chinese man replied, also in perfect Japanese.

"You're right. So you fell asleep *again*, Jun Sahara?"

"N-no..." Jun stammered and explained herself.

She had been surrounded by seven thugs, and had ended up forcing her way through with her two chainsaws, she explained.

Most people would have laughed; but none of the Guard Team members disbelieved her. For one, they trusted Jun to be honest about why she was late. For another, things like that happened all the time on the artificial island.

"Tch. You should have just sliced one open, and the rest would've scampered off with their tails between their legs," Zhang sighed, but Jun vehemently shook her head.

"How could I?! Chainsaws aren't tools for killing people!"

"Then you're using 'em for self-defense? ...Guess I'm preaching to the wrong person, Mrs. Jason."

Dissatisfied at this statement as well, Jun hesitantly raised her hand.

"...Um...that's not..."

"Not what?"

"Eek."

Jun hung her head, looking just about ready to cry. That was when the Spanish man—Carlos—quietly walked up behind her.

He pulled out a chainsaw from Jun's bag and shoved it into her hand.

Then he placed her finger over the trigger and forced her to start the engine.

Brrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrm.

"Here's to a fair fight," Carlos chuckled. Jun's eyes began to glimmer.

Her passive attitude dissipated as she met Zhang's intimidating gaze.

"How could you, Mr. Zhang? That was an awful comparison! Jason never once used a chainsaw in the Friday the 13th series! He's a gentleman!"

"Are we talking 'bout the same kind of gentleman here?"

"It's Leatherface from the Texas Chain Saw Massacre! He's the one with the chainsaw!"

Holding Zhang at chainsaw-point, she ranted passionately about the trivial mistake.

"Anyway! I consider chainsaws to be my family. Please don't compare us to a serial killer like him."

"Says the girl who has the chainsaw-murderer's theme tune as her ringtone," Zhang pointed out, but Jun did not even blink.

"Please! Movies are movies, and I'm me. Can't you distinguish between fiction and reality, Mr. Zhang?"

"I'm starting to feel a little upset," Zhang muttered, and immediately balled up his hands into fists—

—and, undaunted by the whirring chainsaw, he grabbed it by the guide bar in the middle.

"Ah."

By the time Jun screamed, it was too late. Zhang had pulled away the chainsaw with raw strength.

Jun's finger left the trigger, and the chain began to slow. And as if on cue, the glimmer in Jun's eye grew fainter.

"Umm...I'm so sorry, Mr. Zhang... I...I didn't mean to hold a chainsaw at—"

"Damn..." Zhang sighed as Jun returned to her timid self.

Meanwhile, Carlos—the cause of the commotion—was howling with laughter.

Soon, he changed the subject.

"Anyway, that was kind harsh, Mr. Zhang. Chewing out a superior on the phone. Yelling at her, even."

"Shaddap, Carlos. And what's with the shades?"

Carlos spread his arms dramatically and shook his head.

"Ah, I see. I see. You don't know anything, Mr. Zhang. These shades of mine? They're the same model as the one Miss Kelly from Buruburu Airwaves wears."

Buruburu Airwaves was the city's only pirate radio station, officially known as Sousei Airwaves. A woman named Kelly Yatsufusa ran the station as she raced across the island alone in her sky-blue van.

"They don't sell this model on the island, so I had to personally ask Yamato the transporter to bring it in from the mainland. I might work in a place like this, but I still want to look good."

"What's that matter, asshole? Spaniard like you looks best in jail doing capoeira."

"Capoeira? That's Brazil. I think *you'll* look better than me in jail, all handcuffed and doing kung-fu."

Jun watched from a distance as the men argued. She then turned to a female subordinate.

"Um...is Mr. Zhang upset about something today?"

"Yeah, a little."

Just as unusual as the others, the woman was wearing a bondage-style bikini and a pair of jeans. She glanced dubiously at Zhang.

"Umm...is it my fault after all?"

"Actually Jun, you're not the only one who's late today," the woman replied calmly, not answering Jun's question, "half the team's late, including you—the leader. I mean, that's pretty normal around here, but we're actually missing the VIP."

"Oh..."

Jun looked around.

If she had to give up her day off and come out to work, there must have been an especially important job that dwarfed any mission she had been assigned before.

Normally, her job was to guard the leader of the organization that controlled the Eastern District. And because there was supposed to be a meeting with the Western District today, it was a given that she would be on her toes all day—

"Huh?"

Jun looked around. Once, and again.

Most of the Guard Team was present, and the few absent had been suspended from duty earlier because they made trouble.

But someone very important was still missing.

The man whom the Guard Team was supposed to be guarding.

"Forget this crap. Jun. Call him." Zhang said as he came up to Jun, finally breaking off his staredown with Carlos.

The others in the room were trying very hard to avoid making eye contact, unwilling to rouse the sleeping lion.

Jun took out her cell phone from her breast pocket and looked up.

"Didn't you try calling him, Mr. Zhang?"

"...My number's blocked. And he won't pick up when we call from the office," he growled, grimacing.

Jun breathed a tired sigh, searched for the number under the name 'Boss', and pressed the call button.

Understandably, there were no public facilities on the artificial island. But the antennas that were installed during construction were still live, which meant

that cell phones were completely usable. The antennas were relatively new models that could even deal with increased traffic, so with the right equipment it was possible to even use the internet or data on cell phones.

Several rings later, a sleepy male voice came from the other end.

<Yawn...hello?>

The thought of having sounded this way left Jun reeling in embarrassment. Friends were supposed to resemble each other, but had she really acted in the same way as her own employer?

"Umm...um...hello. This is Sahara."

<Ah! If it isn't Li'l Jun!>

The voice seemed to wake instantly, quickly revealing an accent that was very difficult to place.

The voice on the phone was incredibly energetic. That alone made it sound like that of a man in his mid-20s.

"Um...good morning, sir."

<Well, well. Who'd have thought you'd be calling me, Grandeur Ratzfend Zorba Gitarin Santamaria Masamune, at the crack of dawn? Lady Luck will be with me all day long; I can feel it already.>

Jun did not even blink at the long-winded name.

"...Did you change your name again, sir?"

<Aye. Until yesterday, I was known as Sturgeon Lyrefit Nuzo Ferdonaldo Gitarin da Rakchart Sasha Murasame. But that seemed to give me nightmares for some reason, so I thought I'd switch things up. Call me what you like.>

"Boss', then. Um...we have a meeting with a Western District exec today..."

The Eastern District was run by a foreign-funded mafia. But it did not belong directly to organizations like the Sicilian mafia or a South American syndicate—this organization was an unusual one that received funding from many different countries. Even opposing countries and peoples invested into

this one group, and were paid back with money made by people from yet another country. Normally, such a thing was unthinkable—but there were eccentric people in every country and group. There were always people abandoned by the mainstream or bound more to personal profit than nationalism or religion. But it was also true that most such groups had no great power. Even with the lucrative revenue source known as the Etsusa Bridge, these groups were not nearly powerful enough to take over an entire district on their own.

That was when these groups from all over the world came to an unspoken agreement and banded together to stake a claim on the island—which was the origin of the multinational mafia that oversaw the Eastern District.

The investing groups from the different countries (along with, naturally, Jun and the others) had no idea exactly what other kinds of groups from what countries were backing the Eastern District. They only wanted to make a profit off their investments—they did not concern themselves with the others that were funding the district.

The group that ran the Eastern District was, essentially, like a corporation. It didn't possess the mystique of other syndicates or the Western District with its Chinese mafia, but there were currently no particularly notable movements against the Eastern District's investors. Even if one investor in one country were to be destroyed, the Eastern District's leadership would survive so long as others continued to invest.

And trying to destroy the Eastern District itself was a surefire way to stir up international antagonism. Although rumors said that the organization behind the Eastern District was quite small, it was impossible to confirm that for certain.

The Eastern District's group also presented benefits to other syndicates as well. The former's main source of income was money laundering—that is, to 'wash' dirty money and return it to the owner for a profit. The system was also open to use by other syndicates, bringing in many clients from the Japanese mainland as well. From criminal organizations to illegal financial institutions, to politicians, businessmen, and religious groups—all kinds of people came to get their money cleaned.

But the Eastern District was picky about its clients. After all, if they were to work for something like a large-scale terrorist organization, it would be like making the entire island an enemy of Japan.

It was the job of those who oversaw this district to create just enough benefits for secret organizations all around the world that the group's presence would never rise to the surface.

The man who led this group—the man who supposedly negotiated in person with the many organizations around the world for support to create a foundation for the 'corporation'—was the man Jun Sahara and the others called their boss.

The man constantly changed his name. Even in the Eastern District, very few knew what he was actually called.

It was the same with the Guard Team that protected his life. Whenever they complained about not knowing his name, he replied that they were free to call him whatever they liked.

His nationality and age were unknown, but in all other matters the man was easygoing, and he was quite liked by the others in his organization.

Though he was a suspicious man of many secrets, he at least seemed to possess the charisma required of leadership.

That was why, among the Guard Team, their employer was often simply called 'Boss'.

<That's not good! I had a lot of stuff to take care of last night. Sorry about that,> he said after a short pause, perhaps because he had to look at a clock.

"Please, boss..." Jun pleaded uselessly. Zhang grabbed her phone.

"Hey. Boss."

The man on the other end of the line instantly changed gears.

<Ugh! ...Yawn...who iff it...?>

"Don't pull that crap. Asshole."

<And who might you be? I am the traveling guitarist, Ando Banderas. You, my friend, seem to have the wrong number.>

"Shut your hole."

Noting his employer's silence, Zhang continued.

"All right, boss. Those shits from the Western District are gonna sit their asses down in. Ten. Minutes. So why the hell are you so calm?"

Zhang not only swore freely at Jun—his superior—he also extended the same courtesy to his employer.

<Ten minutes? Hmm... then I've got 15 more minutes to catch some sleep.>

"Check your math, dammit." Zhang replied, holding back the twitching of his temple. His vocabulary was already far from calm.

<I think we'll be fine. Yili will wait another 30 minutes—>

"Fuck it, boss. Get your ass here on the double, or I'll beat you to death and pickle your intestines."

<...I don't know why, but I suddenly feel like I need to get over there immediately.>

Five minutes later, the boss arrived with a beautiful woman on each arm.

He had brown skin but Japanese features. There was also something caucasian about his eyes.

The boss seemed to be somewhere in his 20s or 30s, but because of his ambiguous ethnicity it was difficult to tell how old he really was.

"Thanks again, ladies. More fun again tonight, then?" He said, sending off the two women. They were caucasian and Southeast Asian respectively, and were always by the boss's side. As they left, they grinned and waved even at the members of the Guard Team. Carlos waved back affectionately and Jun watched uncomfortably from the side.

It looked foolish at first glance, the way the boss brought women to his workplace. But Jun had noticed a long time ago that, until the moment the boss was safely under the Guard Team's watch, the women were smiling with their lips and surveying their surroundings with their eyes.

The women were likely the boss's bodyguards before he reached the Guard Team, and were also his human shields. The boss had never said so himself, but Jun and the other Guard Team members—even Carlos, with his flirtatious waving—had noticed their roles.

In other words, if everyone knew, there was no need for questions or answers.

Each time she watched the women disappear with confident steps, Jun was reminded of what kind of place the island was, and just how dangerous the place she had stepped into was.

Yet she had no intention of fleeing that world.

Being so clumsy at living, she did not know if she could choose another way of life.

Jun could not think of a workplace where she could blend in more than the Guard Team.

She had just one desire.

To remain on the island.

And to quietly watch over its future.

For that simple reason, she stepped into the darkness again that day.



Ten years ago.

Jun Sahara first came to the island when she was eight years old.

The island was only a foundation at that point, but plans were underway for all kinds of buildings and underground facilities.

Her father was the construction manager of the heart of the island—a cutting-edge piece of technology, the part that controlled the height of the massive floating island according to the tides.

He had lost his wife early, and raised Jun alone. And that day, because she mentioned that she wanted to see the place he worked at, he asked for official permission and brought her on-site.

Ever since she was young, Jun had an unusual habit. When she was exposed to the sound of engines or motors, she either became very calm or very excited.

Her father went and decided, "*it must be because your mother went into labor when she was on a truck.*" Jun eventually came to think the same.

But then again, Jun's father often worked in places filled with the rumbling of engines and motors. Perhaps the young Jun had been influenced in some way as she lived surrounded by such sounds. But there was no way to know for certain anymore, and Jun herself did not care to find out.

To the girl who took the cacophonous roars as a lullaby, her father—the man who controlled those noises—was a subject of admiration and someone with whom she could feel utterly at peace.

After all, it was at her father's instructions that countless engines sang to make roads and buildings, creating a world for the girl one piece at a time.

She loved to watch that process, so she had begged her way to the site that day. But the sound of the engines around her pleased her so much that she ended up drifting off to dreamland in the bed of the truck.

She only returned to reality when the rumbling of the engines stopped.

'*What happened?*'

Opening her eyes with a simple question in mind, she found herself gripped by unease.

The sounds filling the island—the rumbling of the construction vehicles and tools, and the noises going to and fro on the island with all the ease of a man in his own living room—seemed to have vanished completely.

What replaced the engines was the sound of shouting.

They were not cries of danger, but the girl could tell clearly that something terrible must have happened.

'Where's Dad? Why'd the engines stop?'

The girl had always thought that her father was the one who controlled every engine. So the moment the engines went silent, something dreadful began to take hold of her.

"Dad..."

Nearly in tears, she looked around the truck. But her father was nowhere to be found.

But she could see that the people on site were all looking in the same direction.

The vehicle entrance leading underground was a gaping maw in a corner of the aboveground area. The workers' worried eyes were all locked on the opening, and several were shouting as they leapt inside.

"Daddy—"

She was half-sobbing as she ran for the entrance.

Her father was there—she was certain.

The dead silence was scaring her.

Bright halogen lamps and lightbulbs hanging from the ceiling cast orange lights on the concrete walls.

Slipping past the workers' arms as they tried to hold her back, the girl ran only toward the center of the shouts and the murmurs. And when her line of sight suddenly opened up, she arrived at a larger area of the underground.

There she saw—

A massive engine that filled her line of sight, vibrating heavily enough that she could measure its speed with eyes alone.

Later, she was told that the 'engine' was just a part of the mechanism used for raising and lowering the island and not a true engine—but she had no way of knowing that, and at the time she was too overwhelmed by its size to care.

The next moment, someone pulled her into his arms. He was an adult she had never seen before, and in his suit he was a poor fit with the rest of the crew.

"It's dangerous here. This way, now..." he said, voice trembling. She spoke in a trembling voice as well.

"Wh-where's...where's Dad?"

As if on cue, the engine shuddered. *Thud.*

Jun's eyes were drawn to the engine, and the man in the suit covered her eyes with the palm of his hand.

"Don't look!"

With Jun in his arms, the man ran aboveground.

But she saw.

In the arms of the running man, she remembered the image burned into her eyes.

Her father's safety helmet, rolling around near the *thud* of the engine.

And the nauseating spray of red on the helmet.

'*Oh, I get it.*'

When had she begun to think that way?

'*Dad must be moving that big engine.*'

Perhaps it was the moment she saw the helmet, or after she understood the fact of her father's death. Or perhaps it was very recently.

'Dad became one with the engines he loved so much. So now he's with the big engine forever.'

She knew it was all just a fantasy.

But it felt like, if she didn't at least think that way, even her heart would be swallowed by that massive engine—

One year later, she returned to the island.

With no relatives to look after her, she was shunted from one facility to another.

But after she heard that construction on the island was halted, she found herself climbing over the 'no entry' fence and crossing the long bridge and looking up at the clear blue sky from the center of the island.

No matter how long she waited, the engines no longer hummed.

The underground entrance leading to the great engine—where her father was—had been sealed up, the barricades too strong for a child to break through alone.

Under the endless blue sky, it seemed that others had come to the island as well. She could see them walking around. But she did not approach them. Because she knew that, even if she went to someone, the sound of the engines would never return to the island.

So she began to walk. To start the engines herself. To bring back that old sound to the island.

'Dad was looking forward to finishing the island. He worked hard. He worked so hard. So the noise can't stop. I have to start it again—I have to—'

She knew she was struggling in vain. But the girl continued to move in search of an answer—any answer—that would satisfy her.

Was there any engine she could start herself?

After wandering to the end of the day on stiff legs, she finally found something.

It had been forgotten in a corner of the construction site—
—a chainsaw with a rusted blade.

Careful to keep the chain away from herself, the girl struggled for several minutes trying to bring the spin back into the chainsaw.

She pushed and pulled but the engine refused to move. It occurred to her that the chainsaw might be out of fuel, and when she checked there was indeed not a drop of fuel in the tank.

But she did not give up. Over and over again the girl tried pressing buttons everywhere.

Her efforts finally paid off—the moment she lowered the safety bar and pulled the switch,

Brrrrrrrrrrrrrm.

The previous owner had not finished off the fuel, it seemed. What little that clung to the carburetor ignited, sending quiet rumbles into the air around her.

'I did it!'

She knew that that didn't actually mean anything, but the girl was above all happy that the sound of an engine had returned to the island.

So she basked in the sound with all her body.

But the fuel left behind was quickly consumed. The roar of the engine grew quieter and quieter, about to be extinguished altogether.

"Ah—"

Jun found herself reaching out. Someone grabbed her hand.

"Eeek!"

With a scream she tried to shake off the stranger, but a gentle voice came to her from above.

"Are you all right? I don't think this is a children's toy."

A young man of ambiguous ethnicity grinned at her.

So innocent was his smile that Jun forgot even her scream and calmed down.

The chainsaw's speed was set to the lowest, and the chain was vibrating without a destination. The spin had slowed even more now than when Jun reached out—it would probably stop if someone pressed the chain to the ground.

But that vibration as well grew weaker and weaker—

And with one final groan, it stopped.

It was like watching a man in his death throes.

Noting the engine's death, the young man let go of Jun's hand.

"Hey there. I came over when I heard the engine. But my heart almost started fluttering just now, watching a child playing with a chainsaw." He said jovially. Jun slowly spoke.

"Um...what are you doing here?"

The man was clearly suspicious, but perhaps he was a construction worker here to start things up again. With that hope, she looked up at him desperately.

"Me? Right... Let's see..."

After a moment's thought, the man glanced at the chainsaw at her feet and winked.

With the answer the little girl wanted to hear most.

"I've come to restart the engine on this island."

第2章
『東の眼人。西の魔女』



Chapter 2: Rogue of the East, Witch of the West

The underground casino in the theme park hotel in the Eastern District.

It was paradise.

It might not have seemed that way to people who lived in places like Tokyo, but for residents of the island it was clear how incongruous the gymnasium-sized room was on the artificial island.

First of all, there was no graffiti and no cracks in the walls. The ornaments on the walls, in fact, were all very much intact. There wasn't a speck of dust on the red carpet, which was ready to greet any visitor as though it were new.

That alone would be cause for shock on the island, but the room was also equipped with things that most people would never see in their lifetimes.

At the center of the massive room was a roulette table straight out of Las Vegas. And each and every corner of the room was stuffed with all kinds of slot machines. There were baccarat and blackjack corners, and even a table for dice games like craps. One whole wall was dedicated to the bar counter, hundreds of different bottles glinting on the shelves.

It was as if the room alone existed in a different dimension from the rest of the filthy island.

Perhaps the one unusual thing about the casino itself was that, in spite of its many offerings, there were only about a dozen people inside.

"We've only just set up the place. The re-opening day is the day after tomorrow," said a man of ambiguous ethnicity, sitting at a semicircular baccarat table across from a woman.

"Congratulations. I wish you nothing but success."

The woman was wearing an eye-catching *qipao*. She congratulated the man without so much as a change in expression, as though they were simply exchanging formalities.

A woman dressed like a dealer came from the counter and placed two cocktails on the table. She seemed to be perfectly calm, but she was desperately trying to make sure the sweat on her palms wouldn't get on the glasses as she nervously served two of the executives who controlled the island.

"The customers here are a little stingier than on the mainland, but our big advantage is that no one's going to come search the place," the man chuckled.

Behind him was a girl with long bangs, who stood up perfectly straight. She looked like a frightened puppy, but her hidden eyes never left the woman in the *qipao* and the four men in black behind her.

"How shall I address you today?"

"Ah! My apologies. Currently, my name is Char de Grandeur Ratzfend Zorba Gitarin Alfred Santamaria Redrum Masamune. But call me what you like."

'*I-it's even longer now!*' Jun said feebly in her mind, but the woman in the *qipao*—Yili, an executive from the Western District—did not seem affected in the least.

"Gitarin, then."

She plucked out a single name to address the man of ever-changing names. 'Gitarin' was always part of his string of titles, and the Guard Team speculated that that was part of his real name.

"Again? Maybe you could choose a different name sometime. Strengthen our relationship for a change," Gitarin said with a smile, but Yili remained as icy as ever.

"I'm not here to waste time on idle banter."

Yili was the daughter of Ei *Daren*⁴, the head of the organization that controlled the Western District. Her mother was an Englishwoman. Although Yili was still quite young, she was a force to be reckoned with among the Western District executives, and was a powerhouse whose influence reached even the depths of the Eastern District.

⁴ Elder, or boss.

"We've already wasted time waiting for you to arrive."

Yili glared, but Gitarin seemed wholly unaffected.

"Ah! So Yili the eternal is upset about *time*? That's not like you at all."

"Indeed. What upsets me is your missing professionalism."

Yili made a point of maintaining brevity. She and Gitarin were not very compatible.

"Heh. Excuse me. I'll try to be more considerate from now on."

What followed afterwards was a simple exchange of information on the island's economy. And normally, the meeting would have drawn to a close there. However—

Gitarin suddenly withdrew his smile.

"So what business do you have with me?"

Yili was silent.

"You went to the trouble of changing our meeting date. You must have some urgent business."

Yili thought for a moment, but she soon raised her right hand. The four men behind her bowed and left for the bar on one side of the room.

It was 30 meters from the table to the bar. Though the casino was by no means lively, there was a fast song playing; it would be impossible to hear anything from the counter unless the people at the table raised their voices.

"Jun."

"...Yes? Oh, yes sir."

"Looks like she wants some privacy. Go over to the counter and chat with Misaki for a bit."

"Yes sir!" Jun replied, and bowed at Yili as well. The two bags on her back came into view when she leaned forward.

Yili seemed somewhat surprised at the sight of Jun.

"...She's *still* the leader of the Guard Team?"

Yili's tone took on a more affable note. But Gitarin's voice did not change.

"That's right. Two years in a row now. Amazing, huh?"

Yili glanced at Jun as the latter walked over to the counter. She made a dubious face and turned back to Gitarin.

"And she's your only bodyguard here, too. I suppose you must place a great deal of faith in her."

Among those in the casino, Gitarin, Jun, and the three employees on duty that day were the only people affiliated with the Eastern District's organization. The rest of the Guard Team was placed at the casino doors and the entrances and exits of the theme park.

Noting that Jun had left, Gitarin put on a mischievous grin and whispered,

"—and I suppose you think you can kill me now?"

Yili's eyes flew open at the candid question, but a second later she smiled for the first time since she entered the casino.

"That wasn't even funny. We're not foolish enough to destroy such a convenient balance of power."

But her smile was quickly erased by Gitarin's comment.

"One of your guards. Is he a newbie? He's doing a bad job of masking his bloodlust."

"..."

"Now that the Northern and Southern Districts are gone, we're the only ones in your father's way. And forget the balance of power. I bet you—and especially your father—assume that the Eastern District will crumble without me."

There was a moment of silence.



The two leaders said nothing, their gazes intertwining like lovers as the music continued in the background.

They were trying to read each other. Gitarin's tone was flippant, but his gaze was the epitome of gravity.

The silence was broken first by Yili.

Sighing as though in surrender, she broke her stance. She placed her elbows on the table and elegantly steepled her fingers in front of her face.

"Sharp as ever, Gitarin."

"That's all I've got going for me."

Yili was personally preventing herself from using her hands. Gitarin breathed a sigh of relief.

"But I've gotta hand it to your father. Using his own daughter as a bullet, I mean," he said, sounding honestly impressed. But his words were mocking.

"I didn't come here particularly to kill you," Yili replied defensively, "Father simply instructed me to take your life if you gave me room to do so. 'Room' in this case implying the possibility of my making it back alive. So I'll relent... for now. Your pieces are already in place, and I can see that I won't make it home if I were to kill you."

"That's pure coincidence. Hmm...maybe things would be different if you had someone more skilled by your side? For example, your boyfriend and personal assassin who disappeared half a year ago."

Yili's eyes narrowed to slits.

"Even a still bullet will explode if you prod it with too much force. Did you think I was an emotionless robot?"

"Whoa, I'm prodding you *because* I know you have emotions," Gitarin provoked, snickering.

A minute earlier, Gitarin's emotions had seemed to fluctuate with the presence of his foe's bloodlust. But this time, he was trying to draw that

same bloodlust from his foe. He was baiting Yili with his unpredictable nature.

"Petting an animal against the direction of the fur feels better than doing otherwise. For the one doing the petting, anyway."

"Do the same with a dragon's scales, and you'll only incite its wrath."

Yili's fingers, which seemed to move with minds of their own, stopped. Bloodlust was growing clear in her eyes.

Noting that, Gitarin hit the table with his pointer finger.

At that very moment, something seemed to cut the wind. The cherry stem that was sticking out of a glass in front of them was vaporized.

Yili easily withdrew her bloodlust as though she had planned it out from the beginning. She had made her hostility clear because she knew Gitarin intended for something.

"I thought you'd sent everyone away."

"The point was just to make sure no one could *hear*."

"...I'm glad for you that you have a talented sniper. Will you shoot me?"

"Why would I? I have no reason to. Killing you won't dent the Western District. Nor will killing your father. That's how I see your organization. That cherry trick just now was no threat; I'm just informing you that you'll have to face hell if you try to kill me and get away with it. ...You know already, right? The Eastern District isn't used to conflict. Defending ourselves is all we can do," Gitarin said, but in his mind he was praising Yili.

'Not even blinking in a situation like this...she might be even bolder than her father. Better not turn her against me,' he thought, reaching for his glass.

"Enough idle chatter."

"Of course."

Their idea of 'idle chatter' was clearly unusual, but that was how meetings between Gitarin and Yili always went. An unforgiving and fickle, murderous

air seemed to swirl through the casino, but for the two executives it was just part of exchanging pleasantries.

After their bloodcurdling greetings, they finally turned to their main topic of discussion. A meeting outside the regular schedule usually meant that something was happening to the entire island.

The cause behind this particular meeting was—

“...I know why you’re here. They got five of us. Yours?”

“Eight. All of them *after* Kuzuhara left the island.”

“It’s snowballed into a big headache on our side. Some of our execs suspect your people.”

“Ei Daren also suspects you.”

They were discussing the victims who had been murdered over the past month, whose killer (or killers) did not leave a single clue.

Not only that, the numbers only referred to those who were shot to death.

“If you put that in perspective, Kuzuhara’s influence is overwhelming. I’d almost like to recruit him into the Guard Team.”

“I have no intention of letting him leave, although he doesn’t seem to want to.”

Kuzuhara was the captain of the Western District’s volunteer police force. He was a regular in the conversations of island children who debated who the strongest person on the island was. Other candidates included Greatest Zhang, who was the underground pro wrestling champion, Hayato Inui, who controlled the Pits until half a year ago before disappearing from the island, the living urban legend Spring-heeled Joplin, Yakumo Amagiri, who was supposedly the island’s ‘strongest and craziest’ Killer Ghoul, and—for some reason—the owner of a ramen shop in the Eastern District.

It was no exaggeration to say that the Western District’s volunteer police relied entirely on Kuzuhara, and that the way he took down thugs carrying guns with the disadvantage of being alone and unarmed was practically an art form.

"He said he wanted to visit some graves back on the mainland, so we gave him a two-week vacation. It's like whoever is behind this was waiting for that moment."

"There aren't a lot of guns here in the East to begin with, but there are definitely more of them these days. And now we've even got a serial killer targeting our people. We can't just sit around and do nothing," Gitarin sighed, shaking his head.

"I have a hunch," Yili said plainly.

"Oh?"

Yili deliberately lowered her gaze and took a deep breath.

"Ginga Kanashima. The man who is distributing guns out of our control."

Ginga Kanashima.

Gitarin frowned—though his own name was outlandish, this one was unusual enough.

"...That's a funny name. Who is it?"

"A small fry Kuzuhara arrested half a year ago was carrying a gun from outside our influence. We questioned him, and he answered."

Yili briefly recited Ginga Kanashima's profile.

He was 28 years old. Until four years ago he had lived on the island, smuggling firearms he purchased on the island to the mainland.

But at a certain point, he disappeared from the island.

To be more accurate, he had gone into hiding somewhere on the island and removed only his presence from the city.

Because his name stopped coming up on the Western District's official gun circulation routes, Yili and the others had assumed that he made a mess of himself on the mainland or was eliminated, nothing more.

"And yet he was on the island all along?"

"He was making deals under a pseudonym. But the man Kuzuhara arrested had seen Kanashima's face on the mainland."

"So you figured him out, eh? ...Wait, something doesn't add up. Why would he need to deal in firearms on the island? There's much more money to be made buying guns from your people in the Western District and selling them at a profit on the mainland," Gitarin said, pointing out the obvious.

Yili smiled. It was a mix of curiosity and mockery at Kanashima—a smile of pure ice.

"...Revenge."

"Beg pardon?"

"...Never mind. Forget about it. We can't be certain at this point."

"Hmm..."

Though Gitarin was dubious, he quietly let it slide. Yili was not one to bring up far-fetched theories at a meeting; in other words, she was almost certain that Ginga Kanashima was involved in the serial shootings.

"I suppose we'll find out once we catch this Kanashima character, but the problem is the identity of the people shooting our men with these guns. It might even be *one* person's doing."

Though so many members of the organizations were being shot, not a single witness had emerged. It was understandable in some ways, as there was no official police force on the island and locals felt no need to involve themselves in such dangerous business. But that still left questions.

Those who were shot were always attacked when they were alone. After the first shooting, all organization members were advised to avoid moving alone, and executives had been ordered to have guards around them as much as possible.

And yet the culprit—or culprits—managed to find brief instants when their targets were alone to fire the fatal shot. As though they had the entire island under surveillance.

The places and times of death were random; so if the culprit really was an individual, their actions were completely unpredictable. And even if there was more than one perpetrator, some of their victims had been shot when they were alone only by chance. The only way to describe the killer would be as some sort of magician who knew the movements of every person on the island and teleported in front of his victim when the victim was alone.

"They might even be planning to kill anyone who's part of an organization, picking them off one by one...then again, we'd know if a group that big set foot on the island."

As Gitarin hypothesized, his grin began to fade.

"That doesn't matter."

In contrast, Yili had a cold smile on her face.

"Whether they're an organization, a nation, or even the American military, the fact is that they underestimated us. Our course is clear; make them regret what they've done, even if there's only one man left standing to grind their flesh to bits."

Gitarin slowly shut his eyes, reassured. A smile returned to his face.

"Excellent. Then let's talk specifics."



"How could you, Jun? You should have told me on the phone last night!"

A slight distance from the executives, at the counter seats near the corner, stood the girl in the dealer uniform who had brought cocktails to the executives. She was complaining to Jun, who sat in the farthest seat.

"No one told me we'd be getting such an important visitor today! And I was wondering why they called me last-minute when the re-opening is in three days... I would've died if I spilled anything! I swear! I thought things were looking up because I didn't get caught up in anything in the past few days, too! Argh! God hates me, I know it!"

"I-I'm sorry, Misaki..."

Jun found herself apologizing at her friend. Because she had completely forgotten about the meeting, she had stayed up late chatting on the phone.

The person berating her now was the friend with whom she had been chatting.

Her name was Misaki Yasojima. She had been working as a casino girl in the Eastern District for three years.

Perhaps she was born with abysmal luck—Misaki was working on the island was because her family on the mainland had lost everything at an underground casino and sold her to the criminal underworld as collateral.

"I'm sorry... I completely forgot, too..." Jun trembled, looking just about ready to cry. She looked nothing like a bodyguard carrying two chainsaws on her back.

Because Jun only found peace in the rumbling of engines, she became timid when the sound was gone—even when she was talking to children.

But when she wielded her chainsaws, she ran wild. To the point that 80 percent of those who saw her might suspect that she had multiple personalities.

Misaki looked at her friend, who trembled like a newborn puppy. She couldn't even get angry.

"Anyway, are the execs talking about that thing, do you think? About how people from the organization were killed," Misaki said, changing the subject.

"Probably," Jun replied with a nod.

"Hm...scary. Be careful, Jun."

Misaki knew very well that Jun was part of the Guard Team and had seen her wielding her chainsaws. But she found herself worrying for her friend when the latter became so timid.

Most people did not believe it when they learned that Jun was the captain of the Guard Team. Normally, she looked less like a bodyguard and more like someone who needed one.



The same went for the female executive of the Western District.

Many disbelief when they first learned that Yili was an executive (and in such cases, those who doubted her eventually came to regret it).

But even from her perspective, there was something unusual about Jun Sahara.

"Incidentally..." Yili said, though they were not yet finished strategizing. "That bodyguard you're so proud of—is she really really fit to be in her position?"

"You're still doubtful, Yili?! You shouldn't be, my friend! I'm going to get angry if you don't."

Though Gitarin's words were threatening, his smile never left his face.

"Jun is the *captain* of the Guard Team, you know."

"I thought you decided the captain in a rock-paper-scissors tournament?" Yili replied sarcastically, not really believing the posters.

But—

"That's right. A monthly rock-paper-scissors tournament. Jun's been winning 'em all for two years straight."

Yili could not respond.

"Jun is unbeatable at rock-paper-scissors, you know."

'Really? So the posters were serious after all?'

Though that alone was hard to believe, what bothered Yili more was the phrase 'two years straight'.

Yili knew of at least 15 members of the Eastern District's Guard Team. Although she did not know the format of the tournament, she did not understand how anyone could remain on the top for 24 tournaments in a row. Was it even possible?

"I'm not saying she's lucky, though. Which is why I trust her so much."

"?"

"Just between us, Jun plays a little late."

It was a low-key confession. But Yili stared, not understanding how that fit into the tournament.

"As soon as her opponent decides and makes a hand, before they even notice Jun changes her hand. It's so quick you'd need a frame-by-frame replay to see it. Her concentration and reflexes, and her skill in observing her foes. Those are the things I value so highly about her. I didn't even notice what she was doing until she told me herself."

"...I wonder why she felt the need to tell."

"Apparently she felt guilty. But you know what else she told me? 'I'm going to keep playing this way, but if you don't like it, please let me know. I won't do it again'. She'd prefer to get permission ahead of time rather than get found out later. She acknowledged that she cheated."

Yili's gaze slowly shifted to the bar counter. Jun was in the corner seat, receiving reassuring smacks on the back from the server.

Gitarin smiled at Yili, whose profile betrayed a sense of curiosity.

"She might not look like much, but Jun's a real veteran. She can be underhanded sometimes but she's a good girl at heart. Which is why I can place my trust in her."

Holding his head high with pride, the boss of the Eastern District boasted to the Western District.

"Another reason for the rock-paper-scissors tournament is that it doesn't really matter who becomes the captain. Anyone can take the job, no problem. In other words, those kinds of people are the only ones we accept into the Guard Team."



At the same time. The Pits.

If the casino in the Eastern District was the paradise in the dump known as the island, the dump in the dump known as the island would be the Pits underneath the shopping mall area.

There was no question—it was a disgusting place.

It was essentially the amalgamation of every far-fetched rumor about the island—from tabloid articles titled, ‘The modern-day Kowloon Walled City—a lawless world filled with death and violence!’, to general assumptions about the island—‘dangerous’, ‘filthy’, ‘lawless’, ‘a criminal underworld’, ‘full of drugs’, or ‘more shootings than LA’.

Life in the aboveground and underground was much safer than life in many slums overseas, and though illegal there were businesses like clinics and restaurants. There was an independent economy on the island.

But the Pits were different.

It was truly a lawless world.

The air. The noises. The lights. The smells. Anyone who set foot in the Pits was exposed to—and arrived at—the same conclusion.

It was a dump.

That was all one could conclude, if one happened to be a person from a normal background.

But there were people in the world who actively desired such an environment.

If the island had been completed, the area would have become a massive parking lot.

Fluorescent lights flickered on and off, and in places where they no longer shone, halogen lamps and lightbulbs blinded those who stared too long.

Generators whirred everywhere to power the lamps, and there was a faint whiff of fuel in the air from their use.

Piles of garbage rotted in mounds, and between them pieces of plywood or leftover construction material covered the concrete floor completely.

At one point, the Pits had been a decent place to live. But when the man who controlled the Pits left the island half a year ago, the putrid air from the past began to return.

In that downward spiral, a group of men were walking in exhaustion.

"Fuck! Who was that bitch?"

The men, who were new to the island, stopped in a quiet corner and kicked at piles of trash. Soon there was a thud, and a cloud of dust—along with a nauseating stench—rose into the air.

"Which one of you was it? Who's the dipshit who said we'd grab that one?!"

On the island there were no rules to tie them down, they had heard. That was why they had come in the first place. The men, who partook in all sorts of crimes in Tokyo—mostly of the violent sort—had accidentally murdered someone in the middle of a mugging, forcing them to flee to the island.

The police could not reach them on the island, and there they could run even wilder than before. At least, that was what they'd thought at first. But they had underestimated the locals. The people did not show much weakness and very rarely stepped into deserted places.

The Pits were a different story, but those who walked there were either more dangerous than the men or completely destroyed by drugs. They could not pick fights on a whim.

Their first misdeed on the island was beating an old man to death when the man complained. It was a seven-to-one beatdown. Though they did not wait to see if they had killed the man, there was only one thing that occurred to them as they watched him bleed on the ground: the old man had almost no money, so the only thing they got out of the attack was stress relief.

As their annoyance mounted, one of them had noted that a lone girl passed through a deserted stairwell every morning. So they took the chance to gang up on her.

And that was when they learned just how dangerous the island really was.

The chainsaws wielded by the girl with bangs left the men scarred with fear. She had rampaged through the narrow stairwell with all the theatricality of a Beijing opera. And she had damaged only the men's hair and clothing, not spilling a single drop of blood.

Only when the men were all paralyzed with fear did the girl shut off her engines, bowing at them for some reason before she quickly ran up the staircase.

"What. The. Hell?! The eastern zone? Some guard team?! The fuck was she going on about?!"

The thugs could not respond to their leader's show of frustration.

The men had done no research before coming to the island. And even if they had, it wasn't likely that articles on the organizations controlling the districts (or their guard teams) would end up on a magazine.

"Shit. I gotta fuck someone up. Let's go kill something."

"Yeah."

"Let's go."

The leader's proposal sounded like a joke. But the thugs sniggered in agreement.

To them, the word 'kill' just meant 'beat to a pulp and take their money'. But their lack of control meant they did end up killing people. The old man earlier and the murder that drove them to the island.

They looked around, scoping out potential prey. Soon, they spotted a girl around late elementary school-age to early middle school-age staring in their direction.

"What're you looking at?" One of the thugs demanded, grabbing her skinny arm.

"Hey, she's just a kid."

"You sick bastard."

The other thugs chuckled in disbelief, but the man holding the girl did not let go. He grinned.

"Hold on. There's no way a kid this puny's alone. Her parents must be around somewhere—we can shake all the money from 'em until they bleed."

"So we're kidnapping her?"

"Kidnapping? We're kidnappers now?"

"Like *real* bad guys. Hah!"

The suggestion was as casual as a game, but the thugs played along and quickly changed the discussion into one about a real kidnapping.

The girl knew exactly what was happening. And yet her face remained blank.

"Check it out. Betcha she's wondering why we're picking on her."

"You said that this morning."

"It's all good. This kid doesn't have chainsaws."

"You gotta be shitting me."

The fear of Jun had long disappeared from the men when they locked on to their new target. If they knew the meaning of the phrase 'learn from one's mistakes', they would not have ended up on the island in the first place.

"So where's your parents, kid?" They demanded, grinning crudely under the flickering fluorescent lights.

But the girl's expression remained frozen as she replied in a monotone,

"They're gone."

"What?"

"Our parents...they left us on the island."

The thugs exchanged glances.

But—

"As if."

"No point tryin' to lie to us, kid."

"Get whoever's in charge of you."

They showed no hint of sympathy. They did not even think about the meaning of the girl's words.

Yet the girl's blank expression refused to change.

Then came her eerie reply—

"You killed him."

"...What?"

The girl.

"Three days ago, just above here. You killed an old man I didn't know."

"Huh?"

Only then did the thugs notice that the girl's expression never once changed. They looked around at one another.

"The old shit's dead, then?"

"Who gives a crap? How'd this kid know?"

"Don't look at me."

"—going to kill me?"

Ignoring the thugs, the girl began to actively speak her mind.

"Are you going to kill me?"

Like a marionette with its strings cut, her words clattered weakly. One word after another, piling up like objects.

"Are you going to kill me like that old man I didn't know? Are you going to kill me? I didn't do anything wrong but you're going to beat me and beat me and beat me and beat me and laugh at the blood and stomp on the open cuts and beat me again until I die? Are you going to beat me to death? Are you going to kick me to death? And are you going to go somewhere after that? Look inside my wallet and spit on the ground like you're bored and beat me again and again and again and again until I die?"

There was no emotion in the girl's train of thought. Most people would be sobbing in fear by that point, but the only part of the girl that was moving was her jaw. Her eyes and brow hadn't so much as twitched.

Even the thugs were getting scared. They were silent as stones now, their eyes locked on the girl's face.

"I don't want to."

Because they had no idea what was happening, they had no choice but to listen to the girl.

"I don't want to. I don't. I really don't want to. I don't want to die yet. Nejiro promised me. He said he'll take me outside. He said he'll help me escape this horrible place. He said we'll be happy when we leave this place."

"Hey...what's the bitch saying?"

One of the men, feeling a chill down his spine, stared at the girl as though she was a ghost.

"Hey. Enough. Shut up."

"So I don't want to die in a place like this. I don't want to. So—"

As the girl continued, the leader of the men stepped up to grab her by the collar.

"Shut your hole, you little—"

Shk.

There was a sharp, low impact near the thug's gut.

He realized then that something warm had entered his stomach.

He also noticed that something had splashed violently near his back.

But by the time he noticed that the sensations were a bullet and his own flesh respectively, his mind was already lost to complete panic.

"So I'll kill you before you kill me!"

The girl's tone rose for the very first time as her voice echoed quietly through a corner of the Pits.

And the thug's body crumpled slowly, starting with the knees.



'What. What was that.

'What just happened to me?

'Fuck. That hurts.

'Oh god the pain it hurts it hurts it hurts it hurts it hurts it hurts my gut it got me in the gut what the hell this hurts my stomach is burning something's spilling fuck this hurts it's like there's a heart in my gut shit shit shit shit—'



The thug twitched. The girl stood in front of him, smoke trailing from her hand.

To be specific, the smoke was coming from the object concealed in her hand.

A little large for her hand, it was a grey object shaped like a handgun—no, a real handgun.

In color and shape and size it was nothing like the guns the thugs had seen in movies, but the trail of smoke from the muzzle, the stench of gunpowder, and the fact that their friend had crumpled before them—

Those facts were enough to show them that the object in her hand was indeed a gun.

"Hey...hey. What the hell, man?"

One of the thugs said to his friend, but there was no reply.

"Hey! What the fuck *is* that thing?!" He continued desperately. But the answer came from behind them.

"It's a gun. This model's called 'Rat'. Apparently it's the latest version from overseas—it's not even in mainland Japan yet."

The thugs turned in unison, as though a spell had been broken.

"It's a gun made of special plastic with a built-in silencer. There's so little recoil that even a little girl could use it. Which means it's not quite as lethal, but from a short range it can still do a lot of damage."

The men froze once more.

At the center of their sights was a boy dressed in white. He must be the one talking to them. But that didn't matter so much as what was around him.

What cowed the men even more were the dozens of children around the boy in white, each and every last one of them holding the same grey gun as the girl.

"Are you scared?" Asked the boy in white, but the thugs did not answer.

The children were no older than 15 or 16, and the youngest ones could not be any older than elementary school-aged. There was an even ratio of boys to girls, and there was no uniformity to the way they dressed. But with the exception of the boy in white, they were all in such filthy clothing that from afar, the children all seemed to be wearing dark grey.

The children other than the boy in white were all holding guns. It was like dozens of steel masks had been lined up in front of the men.

Trapped between anxiety and terror, the thugs were rooted to the ground, forced to listen to the boy in white.

"I'm sure it must be terrifying to be surrounded by children holding guns. But if you think about it, children caught up in civil wars do the same."

With his arms hanging at his sides, the boy continued.

"Do you know how many guerrilla fighters in the world are less than 15 years old?"

The men's anxiety slowly transformed into fear in the face of the guns. Though something like this might normally send them plummeting into madness, the strange juxtaposition of children and firearms drained the realism from the scene.

Their minds were paralyzed to the point that they had completely forgotten their fallen friend.

There was nothing delinquent about the children. On the mainland, they could pass as anything from honor students or shut-ins.

"But this is Japan. Don't you find that strange? A group of children like us, in Japan, holding guns and surrounding you."

What followed was a simple question.

"It's so very strange. ...What is this island, do you think?"

'Who gives a shit?' The thugs wondered, but the weight of the children's stares kept their mouths firmly shut. The ringing of their own breaths in their ears made it clear to the men—whether they liked it or not—that an indescribable tension had come over them.

"What does the island seem like from the mainland? A beautiful place? Paradise? Is it incomparably better than the mainland?"

That was what the men had thought, at least before they came to the island.

Rather than answer the questions, the one man whose mouth could still move mustered all his courage to speak.

"What...the hell are you... A gang?"

The boy did not seem to mind that his question was met with another.

"A gang? Like the color gangs in Tokyo?"

A bitter smile rose to his lips.

"This is getting nowhere. Don't compare us to punks who collect clothes with their parents' money. We're copying American gangs just like the color gangs are, but we don't have money. We're closer to American gangs in that way. We're in a gang because we have no money. Because we're poor. Because we were unlucky."

After his monologue, the boy in white took out a gun of his own. A small white gun, even more unsettling than the others. The color was a perfect fit for a circus, where pulling the trigger might release a dove into the air.

"And so, all of you are going to die. Because we're going to kill you. Okay?"

"W-wait a second! What are you talking about?! Who the hell are you?!"

The thugs flinched and cowered, but one of the boys spoke as though they weren't even there.

"Say, Nejiro. The guy on the floor over there—wanna bet again?"

The children's gazes instantly focused on the man who had been shot first. He was lying in a pool of blood, twitching on occasion.

"...Less than a minute," said the boy named Nejiro. The other children began to speak.

"What? That's too short. Ten minutes."

"Even the old man lasted 14."

"Twenty."

"Maybe he won't die?"

"He will. Because everyone else we shot did."

"That's because we shot them in the head afterwards to make sure they were dead. We never just left them there."

"Because Nejiro said we had to."

"Oh. The Western and Eastern gangsters?"

"Not gangsters. Mafia."

The fallen man could hear the children's voices grow distant.

His stomach had been burning, but now he began to feel cold—starting from his gut and the tips of his fingers and toes. He was freezing from the inside out.

As his consciousness faded, he understood two things.

One was that they had underestimated the true terror of the island.

The other was that the chainsaw girl, who had driven them off without hurting them, was a saint—

"He's dead."

"He didn't last a minute."

"Weak."

"Weaker than the old man."

"Because he got shot?"

"I guess so."

"Yeah."

"Urgh..."

One of the thugs began to gag at the sight of the unnervingly calm children. Was he so badly affected by being held at gunpoint, or was it the seemingly impossible fact of his friend's death?

But—even though one of them had died, the men did not feel much in the way of anger or sadness. That was all they were to one another.

"Maybe we went a little overboard."

Nejiro put away his gun at the sight of the thug's vomiting.

And as though in exchange, he took out a matching white cell phone.

He picked a number from his contacts list, pressed the call button, and put the speaker against his ear.

"...Yes? Hello? This is Nejiro. ...Actually, one of my friends was caught by some punks and she ended up shooting one to death."

After a moment of silence, a male voice escaped the speaker. Nejiro answered, and glancing at the thugs, spoke again.

"...Yes. I'm sorry. ...So we have six of his friends in our custody. What should we do?"

The conversation continued a little longer, before a smile rose to Nejiro's face.

"Yes...I understand. We Rats obey Ginga Kanashima. Because we're always fellow passengers on the unsinkable ship."

Hanging up, Nejiro took out his gun again.

"He says I can do whatever I feel like," he said, embarrassed. He held up his gun and stared at the men's faces, one after another.

After briefly scanning the thugs, the boy threw out one final question.

"Tell me. Is there hope on this island?"

Six muffled shots echoed in the Pits.

The boy's expression remained unchanged. He had not waited for the thugs to answer.



Soon, a man in a loud Hawaiian shirt approached the children.

"Man...you made a real mess this time." He said, his eyes turning to dinner plates.

"Oh, Daichi. Hello." Nejiro said, his voice a flat monotone. The man looked at the children, astonished.

"Look, guys. Mr. Kanashima's not angry with you, but if you've got bullets to waste on punks like these, you might want to take care of those Western and Eastern District people first."

"We don't take orders from you, Daichi," Nejiro said, looking up at the handsome, grinning man.

"Hey...at least call me Mr. Tsuchimi, y'know? Adults deserve a little more respect."

"Who cares? 'Tsuchimi' is hard to pronounce, anyway. And besides... we're all just Mr. Kanashima's pawns. We're equals."

"Equal, shmequal. You've never even seen the guy in person."

"And *you're* working as a contact *for* us children who've never seen him in person. I think 'pawn' works just fine."

Nejiro was clearly looking down at Daichi. But rather than get angry, the latter sighed in surrender.

"Look, kids."

"And—we have power. Much more than you do."

Nejiro held up a hand. The children, who had been watching silently all this time, took out their guns in unison. There were inhuman smiles on their faces. Emotionless grins carved into mannequins. They were meaningless smiles that did not even laugh at him, Daichi noted.

Daichi found himself curling up into a ball in the face of so many guns, covering his upper body.

"Whoa?! H-hey! If this is a joke, I'm not laughing!"

"It is a joke."

Nejiro waved his arm. The children put away their guns at their own paces.

"That's right. Don't get the wrong idea, Daichi. We're stronger than *you*, but I don't think we can beat Mr. Kanashima."

Daichi breathed a sigh of relief and shot the children a spiteful glare.

"Dammit. You kids are gonna grow up into screwed-up adults. I guarantee that."

"What *are* screwed-up adults, specifically?" Nejiro mocked. Daichi was quick to reply.

His answer seemed to pierce the children's hearts.

"Shits who'll never get off this hellhole of an island."

第3章

『ミス・アシタツキー＆ノー・ウォーチュン』



Chapter 3: Miss Unlucky & No Fortune

Misaki Yasojima was born unlucky.

At least, that was what she decided to think.

After all, most people could endure any suffering if they excused it with misfortune.

She had come to the island three years ago as collateral for the debt her father racked up at an underground casino in Tokyo.

'Sold off as collateral in this day and age? Which historical drama is that from?'

When she first received the news, she thought it was a bad joke. And even if it was possible for someone to be sold as collateral, she thought the chances were one in 10 million, at least.

But she was that one in 10 million.

The word 'collateral' did not hold any meaning at first. She had grown up not speaking much with her father in a so-called 'family without communication'. And at the time, she had been planning to get by on part-time jobs once she graduated from high school.

"A friend of mine says he'll introduce you to a nice part-time gig." Her father had said.

Misaki questioned him further. Supposedly it was a job working at some sort of amusement park. The pay was a staggering 2300 yen per hour, which was enough for her to dive in without a second thought. But how could she have known that 1500 yen of her hourly wage would be set aside to pay off her father's debt?

"Right. That was my fault for not paying attention to the details. So I have nothing to say to that. That's why I decided that I was unlucky. Then I thought, why did I have to be so stupid? It must be because I'm unlucky."

"I know. I know this is just a stupid excuse. So I'm just telling you this, Jun, because you're my friend. ...Yeah. To be honest, I wanted someone to get

angry at me like that, but...I think I wanted to cheer myself up somehow. But when you get angry, I can't tell who's getting angry at who...Huh? Umm...wait. Wait, wait wait that was a joke. I was just lying to you. I'm reflecting on my thoughts, so please not the chainsaw, Jun—"

When she discussed her situation with Jun, she often received lectures at chainsaw-point until the fuel ran out.

"You're being too shrewd, Misaki! Every time something happens, you just give up and say that you just weren't doing your best!"

She would raise her voice as she revved her engines.

Jun was not wrong, and Misaki really had no excuse—but life on the island was too difficult to manage without using the luck excuse as a crutch.

The first mistake, at least, was her own fault—but Misaki had indeed been involved in incidents that could only be described as 'unlucky'.

She ran all kinds of odd jobs at the Eastern District's casino. At first she wondered why such a job would be worth 2300 yen an hour, but within the first month she understood completely.

In the span of one month, the casino was held up five times.

In two of those cases, she was taken hostage.

That, perhaps, was worth the pay. But as she lived on the island, she was assaulted by bad luck in one incident after another.

She was caught up in four shootouts.

She was caught up in six brawls that did not involve gunfire.

She was mugged 13 times.

She was hit by the Buruburu Airwaves van twice.

And other incidents, big and small.

For no particular reason—other than being there, if she had to say—she was often dragged into things.

The worst of her luck by far was six months ago, when she spotted a Western District executive she admired near the bridge entrance.

The moment she began running toward him, a wall between her and the executive had exploded and caused the construction material at the bridge entrance to collapse—she was nearly buried alive.

The explosion was supposedly the work of a terrorist targeting the executive, and in the end the executive disappeared after the blast.

Misaki could barely leave the house for days afterwards, thinking that perhaps her bad luck had even influenced the executive.

It was Jun Sahara, captain of the Eastern District's Guard Team, who encouraged her.

Jun was essentially Misaki's only friend and fellow commiserator in times of distress. Part of it was because Jun was the only girl her age who worked near the casino, but it was more because Jun was the one who often saved Misaki from her many misfortunes.

When Misaki was taken hostage, or when the casino was attacked, it was Jun and the Guard Team under her command that saved her. Jun had personally saved Misaki many times, and so Misaki felt that she owed Jun her life.

Which was true. If not for Jun, Misaki would have died five times over by now.

The only joy in her life of bad luck was her meeting with Jun.

"That's why I'm so grateful, Jun. If not for you, I would be rotting in this city before I could even make excuses to myself." She had said to Jun, once her chainsaws had run out of fuel.

Jun was half-crying then, as she hung her head with the reply, "*n-no, not at all...*". Though Misaki knew how Jun changed in the presence of running engines, she could never get used to her personality shifts.

Her misfortunes were all because she was unlucky.

She had no luck. So there was nothing she could do about her miserable reality.

As long as she told herself that, continuing to shoulder her misery, she might be able to scrounge up tiny scraps of happiness.

At least, that was what she believed.



Neither good luck nor bad luck actually existed.

That was what Nejiro—the boy once known as Nejiro Kanata—believed.

Thursday afternoon. In a ramen store in the Eastern District.

<All right, ladies! Gents! Young masters! Grannies! Lemme pull back all your ears with some sweet airwaves, straight to your hearts! You know what I'm plotting? These airwaves are gonna make your lunch taste even better. If you got no business here, get out! Plug your ears with rice! The guest on today's 'Twelve o'clock Huzzah' also showed up on 'Buruburu Airwaves on the Street' half a year ago! Introducing Yua Kirino the mapmaker!>

The DJ raved through the speakers, her voice piercing Nejiro's eardrums as he ate alone.

The unusual voice echoed from every speaker in the city.

It was an unsettling sound for newcomers, but the radio broadcast, too, was part of life on the island.

Sousei Airwaves—known as 'Buruburu Airwaves' to locals—was a local radio station that had taken over the island's broadcasting system. Its incomprehensible programming continued day and night, and was a familiar part of the locals' lives.

'Twelve o'clock Huzzah' was a simple talk show that invited a new guest every day to share a recipe.

The radio station had countless connections at its disposal. Gitarin, the most powerful man in the Eastern District, had personally graced the radio over a dozen times.

Today's guest, however, was a girl who had just turned 13.

"Yua Kirino, huh..."

Yua Kirino. The name was not unfamiliar to Nejiro.

She was working on a map of the labyrinthine island.

The island's original design boasted a complex system of corridors to begin with, but once the illegal modifications began it was difficult to match the island to its original blueprints.

The girl named Yua was personally exploring the island, discovering and recording every last passageway to create a complete map of the island.

'I bet she doesn't have parents, either.'

Nejiro had heard about her before. She was a little younger than he was, and had lived on the island with her parents before they were murdered.

"So she was dragged here before she lost her parents... that's no different from being abandoned."

Nejiro's fingers froze. He looked up at one of the speakers, eyes narrowing.

"...Just like us."

The Rats—a group of boys and girls led by Nejiro.

They were not delinquent children of island locals, and they were not a gang that had drifted in from outside. With no parents or guardians to speak of, they had an independent community centered around Nejiro. However, the children did not live a communal life. They did not communicate with each other any more than necessary. All they did was efficiently divide up the food and work they received from the locals.

The Rats did not accept just anyone into their ranks. Every member had something in common. That commonality was also the chain that bound them together.

The Rats were neither born on the island nor there of their own free will.

They had been abandoned on the island by their parents or guardians.

When Nejiro was eight years old, his own parents had brought him to the island, leading him by the hand. And before he knew it, they were nowhere to be seen.

In his backpack was a veritable mound of portable rations and bottles of water. Not realizing what had just happened, he assumed that he had simply been separated from his parents. He sobbed and wandered the city.

He was kicked by a group of thugs on the street for being so loud, but no one tried to comfort the crying child. There were no police or centers for lost children on the island. He might be able to find his parents if he could reach Niigata or Sado, but either way he would have to traverse 10 kilometers on foot. And because the island he had been abandoned on was a sprawling labyrinth there was no way a little boy like him could even get to the bridge entrance.

For several days he aimlessly chewed on his rations as he walked, calling for his parents. But then he saw something he was never meant to see—or, perhaps, something he *had* to see.

One of the squatters had dragged his television outside to watch.

The news happened to be on at the time, and to Nejiro's shock, his parents were on the screen.

He rushed over—the newscaster was saying something about how he had been kidnapped.

At first, he did not comprehend. But even an eight-year-old like him soon understood what had happened.

He had come to the island with his parents. So why were they saying, <He disappeared at the park when we took our eyes off him>?

It was all a farce.

At the time, he did not know the meaning of the word—and even now, he had no idea why his parents did what they did.

But even at the age of eight, there was one thing he understood much too well.

That his parents didn't need him.

At that moment, the boy lost a place to be.

He could have escaped the island somehow to ruin his parents' plans, perhaps. But what then? With emotion, not logic, the boy found the answer to that question. That no matter how much he struggled, he would never be able to have his old life again.

It had been seven years since.

Over time, he met other boys and girls in the same position.

'The police don't investigate if a child is abandoned on the island.'

That rumor must have spread on the mainland, as parents who did not care for their children began to come and drop them off, one after another. Nejiro heard that the economy was worsening on the mainland, but he was not affected in the least by the fact that so many parents were abandoning their children.

'There's nothing strange about this. After all, it happened to me,' he thought, and as someone who had been abandoned earlier, he began to teach those abandoned later how to live on the island.

When he saw the children gathered around him, Nejiro realized that their presence was a sort of power.

Before he knew it, he began to want to return. To the world that abandoned them.

If they knew nothing, perhaps they would have been satisfied with the island. But, because the island was a dump, there was just too much information there—be it magazines, internet, or television.

He didn't care about his parents. But he could not forget the heavenly world that remained a hazy memory in his mind, the one he saw on television. And as though the island was a sinking ship—not a real world at all—Nejiro called his group 'Rats'.

Their goal: to return to the world that abandoned them. Or to take revenge on that world.

Or...to flee as far as possible from the sinking island.

Remembering his decision, Nejiro started on his bowl of ramen.

It was delicious, but there was no smile on his lips.

'This place is just a fake world to us. So there's no need to show any more emotion than necessary in a place like this.'

The interior of the shop was nothing like a typical ramen store. There were only two seats at the counter, and a wall-mounted TV had been forcibly driven into the wall. Under that hung a warning sign that read, 'Do not down chili oil'. Although Nejiro doubted anyone would do such a thing, there were many strange people on the island. Everything seemed unnatural to him.

He was not alone. His fellow Rats also understood that the island was unnatural, and were repressing themselves.

That was the only natural reaction for children abandoned by the real world, he thought. Perhaps only their rage would grow stronger with time, eventually turning them into thugs just like the ones roaming the city—

But the girl on the radio was completely different from the Rats. There was something very human in the way she laughed. As though she didn't feel burdened in the least about living on the island.

<My plot today is to learn to make Tonkotsu fried rice from Yua and share it together, just the two of us! If you're too hard up to even dream about lunch, you can listen to us eat and let that fill up your gut!>

<Well, this is one of the items on the menu at Iizuka's Restaurant, which is where I live!>

<Because you're part of their family, right? Which means this is a taste of good ol' home cooking? Heehahaha.>

'I wonder if things would have changed a bit if someone had taken me in. Then maybe I wouldn't be living such an awful life. Maybe I would have found happiness of my own on this disgusting island.'

'No. That's enough. Asking questions like that just dulls my edge.'

'Am I just unlucky? If I were lucky, would I be able to act just like that Yua girl? Smile like a human being on this rotten island?'

'No. Luck has nothing to do with this. I'm in this place because I was too weak. The moment you blame your misfortunes on luck, you surrender. You excuse yourself with luck and forget to grow—forget to crawl back up.'

And so, Nejiro denied luck.

So that he would never forget his resolve.

So that he could gain power that could not be shaken by petty things like bad luck.

"...Thank you for the meal," Nejiro said, leaving half the broth. He left exact change and made to stand.

But the low voice of the owner suddenly fell on his tiny head.

"You don't need to pay if you didn't like it, kid."

"Um... not at all. It was good."

"...I see. Thank you. You just look like you're pushin' yourself too hard."

Feebly, Nejiro put on a fake smile and left the shop.

'He's right. I am pushing myself.'

Nejiro, who hated the island, had no choice but to push himself if he wanted to do anything there.

To eat his meals, and even to smile.

He felt emotional about his position—was it anger or sadness, he did not know. But he quietly began to walk.

To push himself a little further, that he could achieve his mission.

To eliminate the people of the two organizations in the East and West, the root of evil that controlled the island and the cause of all the misfortune.

That was the mission given to him and the Rats.

'It's so much easier.'

'So much easier than accepting this island. Than accepting that this island is our everything.'

The people they killed were part of the island, too. If he just thought of the killings as the act of helping the island to sink, his conscience felt absolutely nothing.

'Yes. We're going to sink this island.'

'We're not running because it's sinking. I am sinking the ship with my own two hands so I can escape somewhere else.'



Thursday evening. Somewhere aboveground in the Eastern District.

A sharp yell shot between the trees and branches.

"You asked for it, you little shit!"

A man in a grey suit kicked the hand of the child in front of him.

"Ah!"

The boy, who seemed to be in his mid-teens, cried out. The grey gun in his hands was flung out of the grove.

"Shit...let my guard down...can't believe it...a kid like you?"

The man panted loudly and glared at the crouching boy, who was cradling his hand.

There was a dark stain on the man's side. He seemed to have been shot several times.

But the man refused to let pain or anger sway him. Slowly, he twisted the boy's arm upwards.

"Kid...who hired you?"

Holding back his pain, he began the most basic of interrogations. But—

"No one hired a kid."

A voice seemed to materialize next to him. And,

There was an impact near the man's temple. The pain, the anger, and the light were robbed from him at once.

Like a doll the man flopped to the ground. Nejiro muttered,

"He hired *kids*."

From the white gun in his right hand, smoke of the same color was rising.

"I told you to aim for the head."

"Thanks, Nejiro."

Nejiro and the boy exchanged words, both equally expressionless.

"You're welcome. Your gun?"

"I think it got knocked over that way."

They turned their heads in unison at the same direction.



A woman in a dealer's outfit was standing there, but the moment her eyes met those of the children she immediately turned and ran off someplace where there were more people.

The most troubling thing was that there was a small grey object in her hand.

Nejiro held up his gun without thinking, but she was already too far out of range for the Rat.

"...This isn't good."

They had been seen. They had only put their plan into action when they saw that no one was around, but she must have wandered there before anyone noticed. That alone would be no cause for concern, but Nejiro recognized the woman's attire.

'That uniform...it's from the Eastern District's casino.'

Though he was worried, he did not let it show. He knew that there was nothing to be gained from revealing his anxiety.

The boy next to him showed no emotion as well, but that was probably because he had no opinion at all.

"...Were we just unlucky?"

"Luck has nothing to do with it," Nejiro said as though to himself, and took out his cell phone.

"We failed to kill him before someone showed up, and we even lost a gun—we were just weak, that's all."

Noting that it would be difficult to chase down the witness, he called his employer.

"Mr. Kanashima? We have a problem."



It was the day before the casino would reopen.

Misaki Yasojima had been told by Inamine, the manager of the casino, to speak to the Eastern District executive in charge of the re-opening.

If she were to be honest, she would argue that she did not feel up to the job—but there was no arguing Inamine's glare.

But it was still a less stressful job than serving Gitarin and Yili the previous day, so in spite of her worries Misaki accepted her work with a smile.

She simply had to greet the executive and go over the next day's proceedings.

That was all she had to do.

But a man died in front of her eyes.

The man was a member of the organization that controlled the Eastern District. He was the one in charge of the casino re-opening the next day.

'I just came to do my job! How did this happen?'

When she went to the office to meet the executive, she was told that he had gone to a park behind the office.

"Oh...by himself?"

How could he be so careless, when organization members were being killed one after another?

"It's fine. He'd never drop his guard, and no goons'd get near him. He's just gone to feed the cats in the park out back. Apparently they'll run off if we go with him," said one of the members remaining in the office, but Misaki's fears were not assuaged. Perhaps it was thanks to the leader's influence that the people of the Eastern District were so laid-back.

"He feeds 'em at a different time every day, so no one's gonna be waiting for him out there. And it's not like he's on a 24-hour watch. We just have to wait in here," the member had said, but Misaki decided that she'd prefer to go

look for the man at the park rather than remain at the office teeming with gang members.

And so, she had gone to the deserted park—

"You asked for it, you little shit!"

She flinched when she heard the shout. She reflexively turned—

And something flew toward her from the trees and fell at her feet.

"Huh?"

It was a grey mass shaped like a gun. It looked like a toy BB gun to her eyes.

Without thinking Misaki picked it up and turned to the source of the sound.

Inside the artificial forest, just out of the way of the footpath in the park, was a messy grove. And between the foliage she could see two children and a man between them—the executive she was supposed to meet.

At that moment, sparks seemed to fly from the hand of the boy in white, accompanied by a dull noise. A red flower bloomed by the executive's head.

'No way.'

Immediately, she realized what she had gotten into.

Others might not have understood. Someone from the mainland might have been frozen with shock after seeing a middle school-aged child shoot a man to death. They would not have believed.

But this was the island, and she was Misaki Yasojima.

It was much too familiar for Misaki, who had been caught up in countless incidents in the past. And on this island, it was not unusual for children to kill people.

That the murder weapon was a gun was surprising, but that shock was not enough to paralyze her. As soon as she understood the situation, she commanded her every cell to flee.

Her pulse quickened. The energy in her blood was fed into every muscle in her body.

The moment her eyes met those of the boys, her body went into full overdrive as she left the scene.



She ran. And ran. And ran.

The girl in the dealer's uniform ran for her life by the light of dusk.

She must have sprinted a full 20 minutes.

She knew that her legs were a mess. She knew that, even though her head thought she was running, she was actually moving more slowly than she normally walked.

But Misaki could not stop. The outrageously casual murder that took place as she watched seemed to chase after her like an icy chill.

And to escape that fear, Misaki Yasojima continued to run.

She was not running without purpose. She was heading straight to the only person she could count on at a time like this—Jun Sahara, the captain of the Eastern District's Guard Team.

She could see the entrance to the theme park. She just had to get past the gates.

When she looked back, the boy in white was nowhere to be seen. But she could not let her guard down. That would be as good as suicide on the artificial island.

It was as though any of the children walking by the park could be the boy—or his friends.

Shaking off those delusions, Misaki finally entered the theme park. Her caution began to dissipate as she tried to come to a stop at the office door.

But her exhausted legs did not do as she wished, pushing her into a stumble as she leaned against the doorknob.

"Jun...Jun—!"

Normally, she might have screamed for help. But Misaki hated herself for always relying on her friend. And now she was trying to drag her into a mess she wasn't even part of.

'How could I be so selfish?' Misaki thought, but she had come all this way without being able to solve her problem on her own.

Opening the door with every ounce of strength she had, Misaki pulled up the words she had been preparing all this time.

"Jun! I'm sorry!"

There were five or so people on standby at the office, with Jun among them. Everyone stared at Misaki in shock before running over, their expressions grave.

Misaki crumpled at the entrance and realized that tears were running down her cheeks.

"—sorry...sniff...Jun...I'm so sorry...sorry..."

Her throat seemed to tighten the moment she found herself safe. Misaki could barely speak.

Jun, who was first to reach Misaki, pulled her by the shoulders into a hug.

"It's okay, Misaki. It'll be fine! Calm down, okay?"

Though she was not even holding a chainsaw, Jun smiled brightly.

Jun must be trying her best to encourage her, Misaki realized, and sobbed again.

'I'm an idiot. I have such a wonderful friend, and I still call myself unlucky. How long did I not realize how lucky I was that Jun was by my side?'

Misaki raised her arms, too, and put them around Jun—

And felt a gentle impact on her right hand.

"Sniffle...huh?"

Misaki looked up. A very tall man dressed in black was holding her right hand. He twisted her fist out of its iron grip.

'Ow.'

Her fist—tight with fear—was forced open. And at that moment, she realized that she was holding something.

'What's happening? What did he just take from my hand?'

With tears in her eyes, she looked up at the tall man—Greatest Zhang.

His lips were pursed as he shot her a glare.

A brown-skinned man—Carlos—glanced at the object in his hand and raised his voice.

"Whoa! Bingo. This baby's a Rat! I know it!"

'Huh...? What?'

"Man, you don't see this model in Japan. It's got a short range and not much power, but it's small enough to be a cell phone charm and has almost zero recoil! Hey, where'd you get this? The Pits?" Carlos asked, shaking his head as he knelt beside Misaki and Jun. "I've got a great idea, *señorita*. Just tell the boss that the exec tried to hurt you. He'll let it slide cause he's tolerant—nah, because he's a softie. I'll testify for you too, if you agree to go on a date with me. Just one date, and I guarantee you'll be head-over-heels!"

'Wait. Huh? What?'

Not understanding a word out of Carlos's mouth, Misaki felt her tears quickly go dry. As her vision cleared she realized what Zhang was holding.

It was the grey gun-shaped object she had grabbed without thinking when she fled. It was so small and light that she had completely forgotten about it.

"Hey. We're tying her up," Zhang said. Jun shot back.

"This must be a misunderstanding! Misaki would never betray us!"

"But, well...she's been apologizing over and over to us for a while now."

'Huh? Whaaaaaaa?'

Misaki began to understand what was happening. She spotted a woman in bondage gear making a phone call in a corner of the room. Her senses were so stretched by the stress that the woman's words were clearly audible.

"Yes, boss. We have her. From her possession of the weapon, we suspect that she must be the culprit."

'Whaaaaaaaaat?!"

She finally realized what she had gotten herself into and let out a silent scream.

She had indeed been abandoned by God, Misaki thought. She was born unlucky.



Thirty minutes later. The theme park office in the Eastern District.

As usual, Gitarin came to the office with a beautiful woman on each arm.

When asked if they should call in the other executives, Gitarin had claimed that that would make things difficult, showing up without them.

"So. Let's figure out our left from our right here."

The boss of the Eastern District sat on an office chair and spun, his legs crossed like a model and his index fingers pressed to his temples. His awkward spin made him look even more foolish than usual.

"Let's start with you, then," Zhang grumbled, and sent Gitarin flying—chair and all.

"...I think you need to remember who's really in charge around here, Zhang."

"As if I care, dumbass," Zhang replied as Gitarin remained in a heap on the floor.

"Tch. That attitude is exactly why you're wanted by the mafia back in your homeland."

"Shut your trap. You planning on giving the bounty hunter gig a shot?"

The most powerful man in the Eastern District was silenced by a thug cracking his knuckles, as though proving that power that was not protected by the law was bound to fall easily to violence.

A heavyweight of the city was being treated like a screwball clown before her eyes, yet the unusual (not quite so unusual in Gitarin's case) scene did little to put Misaki at ease.

Her gaze was wandering everywhere, and the teeth she thought she had clenched chattered more loudly than she was comfortable with.

Jun looked on in worry, and the other Guard Team members watched in concern.

But Gitarin ignored the atmosphere. He sat back in his chair and began to joke around, hoping Misaki would relax.

"Heh heh heh. I understand you must be tense, but not to worry. Our very own underground pro wrestling champion, Greatest Zhang, will now perform tricks to cheer you up!"

"No."

"Wh-what?! Why not?"

"You're *surprised*?"

As Gitarin caused Zhang one offense after another, Misaki found her breathing beginning to slow. It was not Gitarin's efforts, but the passage of time that adjusted her body to the tension.

She began to worry that the Eastern District would not believe her. And if they did not, the man before her might eliminate her.

Then perhaps she should just do what Carlos had suggested; claim that she was the one who killed the executive, and make up an excuse that might justify her actions.

But she instantly set that thought aside.

Her improvised lie was not likely to work, and more importantly she was repulsed by the idea of admitting to a crime she did not commit.

Above all else, to do so would be an act of betrayal to Jun.

Since the moment Misaki stepped into the office, Jun Sahara had been vehemently defending her from Zhang. If she made the false claim now, it would be a worse act of betrayal than if she had actually been the killer.

Steeling herself, Misaki decided to tell everything as she had seen.

"A child."

Gitarin listened to everything Misaki had to say and closed his eyes.

'So he doesn't believe me after all...' she thought, closing her eyes. But then the boss of the Eastern District spun back around.

"The chances of you lying and us believing everything you say is a straight 50-50. Half and half. Then I believe it is worth listening to what you have to say based on the fact that there is at least one person on our side who believes in you."

It was a roundabout way of saying, 'there's nothing to lose by believing in you'. Misaki—and Jun, who stood next to her—swelled with hope.

"I'm just saying 50-50 cause it's a nice round number, but that's not the *real* percentage I have in mind. After all, if this Ginga Kanashima character is the

one who bought these guns, he has no reason to hire someone like you. He would be better off buying off some punk from the streets."

Gitarin pressed his fingers to his temples to think, then released them and swung upright.

"Guess I'll just consult our informant."

'*They...don't suspect me anymore?*'

"What I mean is that we're just going to look into things. There's still the chance that you're our culprit."

"No..."

Jun's protests came before Misaki's sigh. She was soft for being a Guard Team captain, and she was only captain because she won a rock-paper-scissors contest, but her subordinates did not look particularly displeased with her attitude.

Jun's complaint went in one ear and out the other. Gitarin calmly began to explain his plans.

"In other words, Misaki, until our suspicions are cleared, we'll have to keep you under constant surveillance. But there's also the chance that those children target you next. Frankly speaking, the easiest way for us to do things is to lure them in with you as bait and catch them in the act."

Gitarin leaned back on the chair and spun once more. Zhang must have had enough, because he had given up on kicking him.

"And speaking of which, now that one of our executives is dead, us bigwigs are too scared to do anything. Although I guess we can do most of our work through email and telephone."

The Guard Team exchanged quizzical looks. What was the boss talking about?

"And because we don't leave the house, *they* don't get a lot of work."

Snickering like an impish child, Gitarin looked around the room.

"Our Guard Team, I mean."



Night. The streets aboveground in the Eastern District.

Night came to the island.

The artificial island should have been a splash of brilliance over the pitch-black sea. And though only a fraction, that intention had been fulfilled.

All the energy on the island was essentially stolen from the massive wind turbines around the island, or the generators run by solar or tidal power. If that wasn't enough, individuals could bring in personal generators—which meant that, if they were lucky (and though they were committing a crime), some people could enjoy an even better life on the island than on the mainland.

Whitish fluorescent lights shone from the half-finished or illegally modified buildings, and between them were blinding bursts of light from naked lightbulbs or halogen lamps.

The lights seemed to scream with their entire being on the surface of the white island.

Like a swarm of fireflies gathering around a dim light.

Misaki and two men walked down a dark corridor aboveground.

"Our boss is a real rogue. Don't you think, *señorita*—no—*mi amor*? Don't you worry, though. My orders come from a fickle rogue, but I will do everything in my power to keep you safe. FYI, my specialties are cooking and laundry. Call me multitalented," Carlos rambled nonchalantly as he accompanied Misaki home.

"Who'd have thought we had an idiot on our team who hits on the person he's supposed to be protecting," Zhang spat nervously, walking on the other side of Misaki.

"Hey hey hey. Ever watch 'The Bodyguard'?"

"Not worth watching."

"This is why I can't work with guys like you. Too self-righteous for entertainment," Carlos remarked. Zhang shot him a glare.

Walking between the unfriendly men, Misaki thought to herself—

'I really am unlucky.'

As per Gitarin's suggestion—no, his official commission—Misaki was placed under the protection of the Eastern District's Guard Team.

Under the pretext of watching a suspect, of course.

There were no police or courts on the island, and therefore no official investigations or suspects—but with this pretext they could at least convince the other members of the organization to stay their suspicions.

Her escort was also partially a way to protect her from retaliation by subordinates of the murdered executive.

Because the subordinates were highly suspicious of how Misaki arrived just before the murder, they would not back off so easily even if Gitarin told them to stay away because her guilt was not certain.

Because the Eastern District's organization was so laid-back, it lacked the discipline of the Western District.

The independence of individual members made them a very flexible group, but in cases like this that very asset was a disadvantage.

When Gitarin explained the situation to her, Misaki fell even deeper into despair.

"I'll go ahead and survey the place," Jun had said as she left, but the absence of familiar faces was nothing but immense pressure on Misaki. Being accompanied by men who clearly lived on the wrong side of the law, she even began to worry she would become involved in yet new conflicts.

To make things worse, her two guards were not on friendly terms with each other.

People often said that arguing was a sign of closeness, but did the saying apply to these men? Misaki could not tell.

Whatever the case, the most important thing was to get home safely. Then everything would be all—

At that very moment, engines began to roar from the direction of her building.

Brrrrrrrrrrrm. Brrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrm.



A little earlier.

Jun had headed to the destination just ahead of Misaki and the others.

She stood in front of her friend's building and looked up.

Illegal structures made of all kinds of materials were crowded together on the concrete ground. It looked almost like piles of rubble had been forced into the shapes of buildings, but from the looks of the people in the area, security seemed to be decent.

Misaki's room was on the top floor. Jun entered the building and began to climb the narrow stairs.

Walking up one step at a time, she remembered the past.

When she was taken in by the man who would later become her employer, her only friend had been her chainsaw.

The engine-powered chainsaw, so very tiny as it lay abandoned on the construction site.

Having found a shadow of her family in the engine, she had refused to let go of it. When she heard the engine roar, it felt like life coursed through her

veins. When she held it in her hand and felt the vibration with her body, it even began to feel like she was controlling the engine itself.

Even though, in reality, she was the one being controlled by the engine.

She knew that, too. But she did not care.

A local who decided to live on the island had to forge a way of life. Those who could not would fall further than the Pits and sink deep into the sea.

Even her life as a guard, Jun chose for herself.

And even when she chose that path, she held something in her hand—not a gun or a knife, but an engine she could hold in her hand. Her chainsaw.

Gitarin was hesitant at first. But eventually he gifted her with a pair of chainsaws.

They were a brand-new model, so unbelievably lightweight for their length that even Jun could wield one singlehandedly with ease. He had them custom-made so she could do everything from start the engine to adjust the RPM singlehandedly.

At that moment, her 'present' was decided.

The witch of the Eastern District with a devilish grin who tore her foes to pieces with a pair of chainsaws.

Once the rumor spread, almost no one ever dared to approach her.

The Guard Team did not treat Jun differently despite her unusual personality. But other people—especially her peers—either kept their distance to begin with, or drifted away after seeing Jun wield her chainsaws.

'I don't need friends. As long as the Guard Team and my chainsaws—my engines—are around...'

It was around that time, when she was telling herself lies, that a certain girl stepped into her life.

Misaki Yasojima. When Jun first rescued her from a casino hold-up, Misaki was probably as scared as anyone to see her swinging her chainsaws with a smile.

That was what Jun thought, but the girl in question seemed to be extraordinarily unlucky. She was caught up in one incident after another, and Jun had to rescue her each time.

Jun was a hero to Misaki.

And so, even knowing about how Jun let herself go when holding her chainsaws, Misaki showed no qualms about befriending her.

That was something Jun could be happy about.

After all, though until then she had thought that engines were her life and world, for the first time a driving force called a human relationship was created in her heart.

For Misaki, Jun could start her engines without worry.

She could become a demon or a witch with nothing to hold her back.

And so, at that very moment, she started the two engines in her hands.

After a very long climb she had arrived at the top floor.

In the hallway in front of Misaki's room squatted a man.

The door was definitely Misaki's. And the man had put a thin piece of metal into the keyhole, clicking and clattering with the lock.

Jun stared. It was clear he was trying to open the door.

Only then did her eyes meet those of the would-be intruder.

And at that moment—

The narrow building was overwhelmed by the sound of two chainsaws' worth of engines.



Brrrrrrrrrrrm. Brrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrm.

"What was that?!"

Misaki trembled. But she quickly recognized the sound.

"That's...Jun's chainsaws?" She muttered. At the same time, a foolish scream echoed from her building.

"GYAAAAAAAHH!"

The building entrance was already in sight. A man rushed out the doors, his face pale.

He seemed to be in his mid-twenties, and was wearing a loud Hawaiian shirt. The splash of primary colors were clear in the muddled grey backdrop.

A second later, Jun appeared on the rooftop.

"Why is she—"

The moment Misaki began, Jun leapt off the roof.

"Wh-whaaaaaat?!"

As Misaki's jaw dropped, Jun added another layer of incredibility.

She forcibly drove her chainsaw into the galvanized iron wall of the building. The wall put up no resistance, like a piece of tofu against a knife.

At that moment, as the chainsaw viciously shrieked against the wall, the man in the Hawaiian shirt stopped to turn.

Jun and the chainsaw were supported by the wall.

The spinning chain slowly ate away at the wall as it descended straight down like an elevator.

When the concrete ground neared, Jun drove her other chainsaw into a wooden wall nearby and kicked off the two walls as she climbed down the battered building like a cliff face.

And finally, she landed without a scratch.

"...Outrageous as ever."

"That's what makes her so great."

Zhang and Carlos made nonchalant remarks, and Misaki blankly wondered if the repair fees would be subtracted from Jun's pay. She was too confused to think of anything else.

"AAAAAAAARGH!"

The man in the Hawaiian shirt screamed when the roar of the engines landed right behind him, and took off without looking back.

Jun's engines also screamed as she rushed low toward the man, holding her chainsaws close to the ground. She moved with relaxed fluidity, but she was slowly catching up to the sprinting man.

It was like a scene out of a monster movie, when a desperate victim was eventually caught by the slow-moving monster. The chainsaws in the pursuer's hand were just icing on the cake.

Misaki did not know what to do as she watched the scene, which had come straight out of a splatterhouse film. But Zhang and Carlos were already on the move.

Carlos drew a gun from his belt and took aim at the man, who was running in their direction.

He usually behaved like someone who might hold his gun sideways, but surprisingly he held it in a steady two-handed grip.

The fleeing man was so focused on his pursuer that he never noticed Carlos's aim on him. All he did was run in a straight line through the alley between the illegal buildings.

Because of the conditions on the island, locals tended to wear shoes with thick soles, like hiking boots. The man was no exception; his shoes had 2-centimeter soles—

And a bullet was driven into one.

"Wha—"

The man lost his balance immediately and fell forward.

A trail of white smoke rose from the muzzle of Carlos's gun. Instead of aiming for the man, he had shot the tip of his foot as he ran from Jun—Carlos had waited for the man's shoe to hit the ground and shot only his sole.

Though they were not very far, considering how fast the target was moving it was a terrifying show of skill. But Carlos did not seem particularly tense. There wasn't a drop of sweat on him.

The man in the Hawaiian shirt, meanwhile, gaped silently.

He swung his arms helplessly as he fell. Then, Zhang's powerful arms reached him.

Before anyone knew it, Zhang had gone right up to the man and hooked his right arm around the man's neck—and was throwing the man into the air as though performing a Lariat.

"-----!"

The man in the Hawaiian shirt didn't even have time to scream. His body returned the way he came, and landed hard on his back.

And waiting for him there was—

Brrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrm.

As the man lay spread-eagle on the ground, his world was consumed by the sound of engines. A young woman carrying a chainsaw in each hand knelt by his head, and looked down at him with the chainsaws still on.

Her hidden eyes finally became visible.

The tips of her eyes were slanted upwards, and her enlarged pupils glinted with the sharpness of a blade. There was madness and ecstasy in her gaze, like she was looking into another world altogether.

"Heh heh heh...ahahahahaha!"

A deranged laugh escaped her lips, but the sound was quickly sucked into the sound of engines.

"Hey, hey hey hey. Why? Why did you try to get into Misaki's room? Why did you run when I talked to you? Why? Why?"

In each hand she held a trembling chainsaw. Dual-wielding her unusual weapons, she was high on the sound of engines filling her ears in stereo.

"Why? Why? Please tell me! Are you an enemy? Are you?"

Brrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrm.

"What?! I can't hear you at— grk. W-w-w-wait. H-help! Calm down—"

The man's pleas were mercilessly drowned out.

Brrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrm.

"Pardon?! Aww, I can't hear you at all!"

Brrrrrrrrrrrrrrrm.

As everything—even the sound of Jun's voice—was erased by the engines, Jun twirled her chainsaws and grinned.

'Excitement' was no longer an adequate word to describe her state. With the chainsaws active in her hands, she was a different person altogether.

"Man, Jun's off in her own world now!"

"What?! I can't hear you!"

Carlos made a comment in the noise, but his voice did not carry to Zhang.

The echoes of the engines layered together on top of one another, piling up all around like stagnant air. Eventually, the sounds might even take on color and become visible.

"W-wait, Jun! Calm down!"

The one who finally stepped up to stop Jun was Misaki.

Most people would stay as far as they could from a woman wielding two chainsaws, but Misaki had been saved countless times by Jun in this state. The first person who rescued her when she was taken hostage at the casino was Jun, who had been acting just like this. The shock of the encounter made such a big impression on Misaki that she could barely recognize the 'normal' Jun when they met again later.

Naturally, Jun had scared her at first. But the woman who leapt in madness and ecstasy as she wielded her two chainsaws was Misaki's hero, who had come just as she was about to give in.

That was why Misaki could reach out to her without fear.

"Jun! Jun! Who is that man?"

Naturally, her voice did not reach. So she stood in Jun's line of sight and desperately waved her arms. After all, if she carelessly approached drew near or grabbed her arm, she might be cut instantly.

"Ahahahahaha...hah?"

Jun spotted her friend and stopped her hand.

"Misaki! Thank goodness you're okay! I'm just about to take care of— huh? I can't hear you! One sec, let me do something about the noise..."

As the engines slowed, sanity returned to Jun's eyes.

"...Huh?"

She was back to wearing the face of a small, terrified animal. Her bangs floated back over her eyes, no longer supported by the wind of the engines.

"...Umm...I, uh...this isn't... Oh no, I got carried away again. I'm sorry."

"Why are you apologizing, Jun?"

"If I run wild in front of your house, I'd get you in trouble..."

Shutting down her engines, Jun slowly stood and hung her head. But Misaki smiled and slapped her on the back.

"You don't need to apologize. It's all right! And you're my only friend, so it's not like I can hate you or anything!"

"That's pretty sad."

"You poor soul! Then let me become your new friend—no, let me become your new *mi vida*!"

Misaki ignored Zhang and Carlos's interjections and helped Jun as she put away her chainsaws. Though Misaki did not touch them herself, the heat from the blades was warm on her skin.

"Be careful, Misaki..."

"I told you, it's okay."

Watching the heartwarming scene from below, the man lying on the ground muttered to himself.

"I...I'm alive..."

Quietly getting up to flee as though nothing had happened was obviously impossible.

"For now."

"You're in for a living hell."

Restrained by the arms by Carlos and Zhang, the man in the Hawaiian shirt could do nothing but chuckle bitterly.



Somewhere in the Pits.

Though it was fully lit, it seemed like a dark place. That was how things were in the Pits.

There was a place there where even less of the light reached.

Enveloped by hazy darkness in the truest sense of the phrase, dozens of children stood around one boy.

"...Yes. Of course. Yes. ...Yes."

The boy in white looked at nothing in particular as he took a phone call, standing in the midst of other children.

The children wore all sorts of faces, from smiles to anxiety to pursed lips. But there was no emotion in any of their eyes.

Even the thugs in the Pits scattered at the sinister looks of the children.

Naturally, many children on the island had no parents or guardians. Most of them had lost their parents after coming to the island, and many of them had formed communities of their own. But no such community was a match for the Rats in their dead eyes.

Some children had been born on the island itself, but because the island was so young none of them were over the age of 10.

The children who were abandoned on the island learned to live from Nejiro. And as they did so, they slowly forgot how to think for themselves.

There was nothing Nejiro couldn't do. He could find food and places to sleep; he could take care of anything. For the children, who had lost educators in their parents, Nejiro was their friend and the teacher who showed them how to survive in the city.

And so, they learned how to live.

They only needed to know one thing.

'Do as Nejiro says.'

Some children were rebellious at first, but over time even they were broken. The reality that a child with no connections could not survive alone on the island was carved into their souls.

And soon, they also came to realize the truth.

That they needed Nejiro.

Even the children who did not agree with him had to follow him in order to survive. And eventually, even they stopped thinking.

Because that was the way of survival they had chosen on the island.

Nejiro also knew what his friends were thinking.

But that didn't matter to him. He didn't need to care about anything.

He also suppressed his own emotions. He locked away any unnecessary thoughts and calmly pressed on toward his goal.

"I understand. ...We Rats will never betray you. ...Yes. Kanashima will be useless to us when the time comes."

With that, Nejiro stared into space.

Taking in the murky air, he spoke into the receiver.

Though his emotions had been suppressed to the limit, he enunciated clearly:

"We Rats swear eternal loyalty to the Western District."

第4章
『護衛部隊』



Chapter 4: The Guard Team

Night. The theme park office in the Eastern District.

It was past nine in the evening, and the office alone shone in the dark theme park.

Under the blinding fluorescent lights stood about a dozen members of the Guard Team.

It was difficult to gather all the members at once because some were out on duty to prevent another murder.

The reason so many were still left was because many executives disliked the larger-than-life members of the team and instead hired bodyguards of their own.

Their doubts were not unfounded. Many members of the Eastern District's Guard Team were shady characters, and their leader Jun was a girl not yet 20. The fact that the Guard Team chose their captain through a rock-paper-scissors tournament did not help their cause.

From a distance, it almost looked like they were mindless children.

One executive would say—

The Guard Team was a group made for the boss (Gitarin)'s amusement, and had no real power or ability. The boss's real guards were the women he was always with, and both women were from a foreign secret organization.

Another executive would say—

The Guard Team was just a collection of crazy characters from among the elite, and acted as mascots of sorts to win the locals' popularity.

Hikaru Inamine, the manager of the casino, would say—

"Well, they're dependable. You have no idea how much they helped me out. They're good at fighting—and murder, too—although that's not necessarily the same as being good bodyguards. In a word, I guess you'd call them weirdos."

An executive of the Western District—

"The Eastern District's Guard Team? I have nothing to say about them."

The local children would say—

The Guard Team was a group of incredible killers who went around murdering anyone who got in the Eastern District's way. Joplin, the living urban legend, was actually their true leader. And they were engaged in an epic battle against Yakumo Amagiri, the island's strongest and craziest Killer Ghoul.

The owner of a ramen shop in the Eastern District would say—

"The Eastern District's Guard Team? Mercenaries, yeah, but damned if you could call 'em bodyguards. They're all soft, but they believe in whatever they're doing."

"And...the only one of 'em with any sense of money is Sahara, my next-door neighbor. Tell the rest of 'em to hurry the hell up and pay their tab."

Everyone had a different image of the Guard Team, and each time they encountered the team their opinion seemed to change drastically.

Whenever the man in charge of the Eastern District heard these opinions, he snickered and admitted, *"Some of those things're right. Some aren't, though."*

An organization created by a man who respected individuality, and the Guard Team created to protect it.

On this already eccentric island, the team that had been gathered to defend the eccentric Eastern District was the most eccentric bunch of them all.



"Daichi Tsuchimi. Twenty-six years old. Single," Zhang recited, cracking his neck as he stared down at the man in the Hawaiian shirt.

"Um...what does me being single have to do with—"

"Shaddap."

Zhang immediately shut down Daichi Tsuchimi.

"So, you'd be what they call a...a contact."

"Yes."

At first glance, Daichi seemed to be bound only haphazardly to an office chair. But his thumbs behind his back were secured together with a hemp tie. It was an intricate knot dripping with skill that even an expert might struggle against.

"A bunch of kids...Rats, huh? Talk about obnoxious."

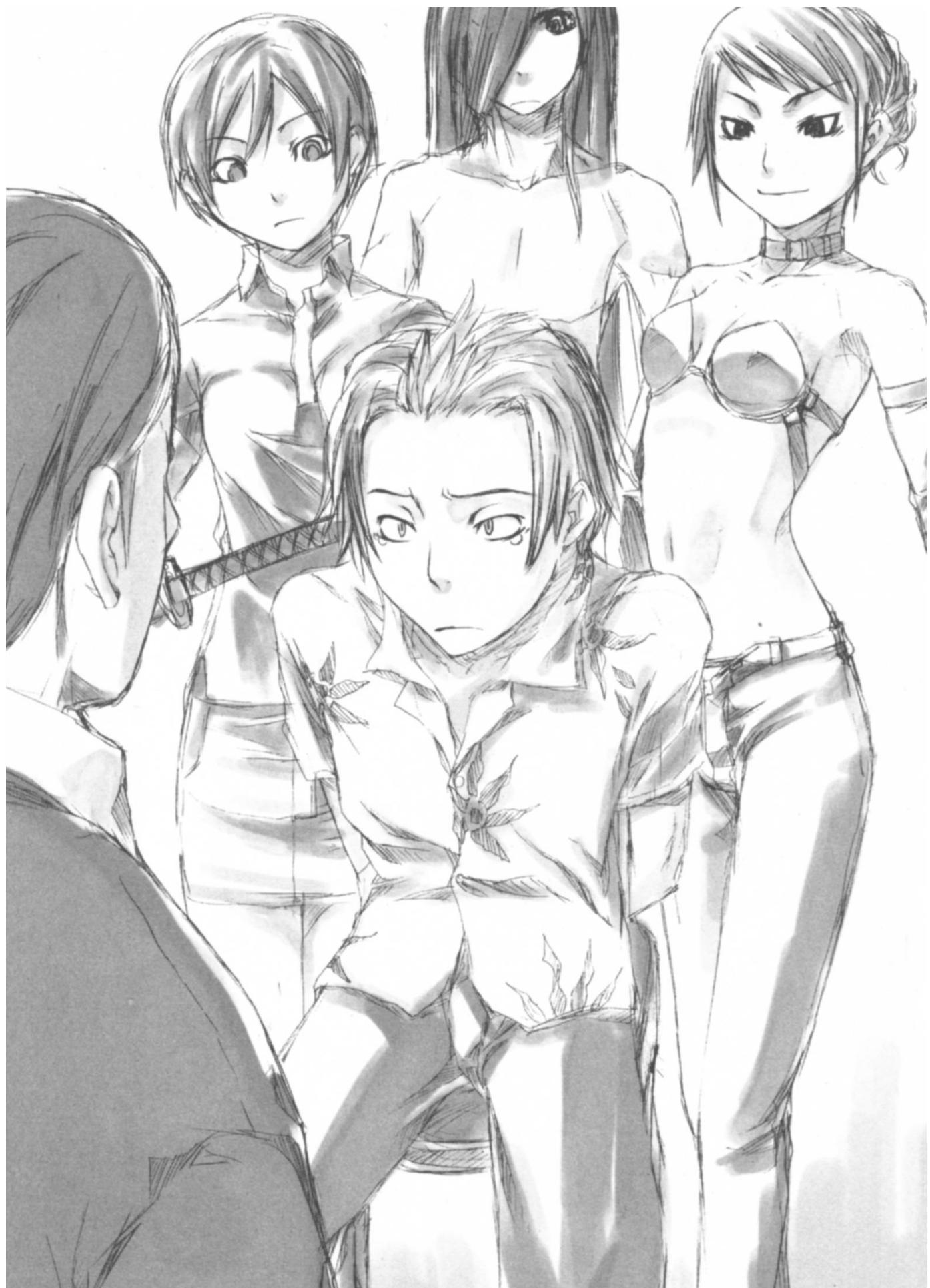
Carlos leaned against a wall and turned to Jun, who was next to him. She seemed discouraged by the content of the ongoing interrogation, as she was hanging her head.

The Rats were children, most of whom were under the age of 15. These street urchins were the ones behind the serial shooting cases.

It was unbelievable at first, but from Daichi's reactions it seemed to be true.

Daichi, who had been caught in front of Misaki's home, claimed to be a subordinate of Ginga Kanashima and was the go-between for Kanashima and the Rats.

They had dragged him in for questioning, but the moment they tied him to the chair, Daichi had screamed—*"Please I'm begging you spare me I'll tell you anything I swear please!"* saving the Guard Team a great deal of trouble.



Ginga Kanashima.

He had been coming and going to and from the island for years, and at one point he did business dealing in light firearms.

In the beginning, he had transported weapons from the island to the mainland to sell them at a profit, but now he was doing the opposite—smuggling firearms from overseas and spreading them on the island.

The Western and Eastern Districts had always been in charge of gun circulation on the island, so the locals had an unspoken agreement that no one should deal in firearms without their permission.

From the moment he betrayed that agreement, Kanashima had essentially turned the organizations—in other words, the island itself—against him. But he had taken the risk and was putting himself in danger for a business that didn't yield any notable profit.

"So, you'd be what they call a...a contact."

"Yes."

After the interrogation, Zhang grilled Daichi with the same question again and again.

Daichi, the man in the Hawaiian shirt, claimed to be a pawn in Kanashima's group who did odd jobs like dealing with other groups. He gave a memorably tired laugh when he explained himself as a pawn.

Zhang had been working out all sorts of torturous methods to interrogate the man, but all that effort went to waste the moment Daichi begged for his life on the office chair.

"A pawn. And with no loyalty whatsoever. Talk about a piece of trash."

"I...I owe a lot to Mr. Kanashima, but those kids messed me up good. You have no idea how creepy they are! I don't know what they're thinking, and they don't even have any respect for their elders."

Daichi seemed to shiver at the memory and hung his head.

Jun stepped forward. She had been reluctant to leave Misaki home alone after what had happened, so she sent her to another room in the office to get some sleep.

"...Umm...so let me get this straight."

When the captain spoke, the scattered members gathered around Daichi.

Zhang gave the trembling man a mocking grin and landed a low blow.

"Right. We'll decide how to kill him *after* you sum things up."

In short, these were the facts:

-Ginga Kanashima imported new firearms from outside the island.

-He gave the guns to a group of urchins calling themselves Rats and had them attack members of the organizations in the Eastern and Western Districts.

-There were about 50 Rats in total. They scattered across the city and assaulted members the moment they were left alone. That was why the times of death were random and the members were killed even when they were alone by chance.

-However, Misaki Yasojima—an associate of the Eastern District—witnessed one of the murders that evening, and even took one of the guns. Ginga Kanashima looked into the casino employees when he got the news and pinpointed her.

-Daichi—the pawn—was ordered to snoop on her and take back the gun by force if possible, but at Misaki Yasojima's house he encountered a monstrous woman with a pair of chainsaws.

"...And that's how this idiot ended up tied to an office chair." Zhang summarized, and fell into a chair with a sigh.

The others put on different faces of their own and brainstormed for their next course of action.

"This is a bother. We can't go killing those kids one by one. I mean, I don't mind shooting a kid, but I'm gonna get one hell of a guilt trip if I shoot an innocent one by mistake. That's just sick, you know? The ladies'll never look at me again."

"We can't go attacking them ourselves, but the Rats fight like guerrillas to attack us. In other words, the only time we can fight back is when they come to us for the kill."

Carlos and Zhang mumbled to themselves, but after a pause they grinned simultaneously.

"This is getting interesting."

"Call this a challenge."

They were both enjoying the peril. Everyone but Jun seemed to feel the same.

Most members of the Guard Team had come to the island because they wanted to involve themselves in things like this. They were skilled, but were missing a screw or two.

"You might be all right with this, everyone...but we have to think about the organization members who might be targeted."

In that sense, perhaps Jun—who could feel fear yet remain calm—was truly the best fit for the job of captain.

At least, when she wasn't using her chainsaws.

"We're still missing an important piece of the puzzle," Jun mumbled timidly, and slowly turned to the incapacitated Daichi. "What is Mr. Kanashima's motive?"

It was an important question. Daichi turned his head for a moment, but the moment Zhang's knuckles cracked he flinched and slowly answered.

"...Mr. Kanashima...wants to break this island."

"We know that. We're asking you *why*."

"...You wouldn't believe me even if I told you. Hell, at first I didn't believe it, either."

Daichi averted his gaze, but saw Jun's grave expression and took a deep breath.

"...Revenge, he says."

"Revenge? On the island?"

"No. On someone who lives on this island."

After leaving the island several years earlier, Ginga Kanashima had continued dealing with a certain organization. They were a violent group with a particular ideology, who used an abandoned factory in the Kanto region as their headquarters. Kanashima had been supplying them with all sorts of weapons.

At first, their relationship was simply that of a customer and a dealer. But over the course of many exchanges, they developed a partnership based on trust.

But one day, a police officer discovered the headquarters, which led to a heated shootout in the factory. His allies were all arrested, and Kanashima alone escaped. But he had been shot in the hand by the police officer.

It would have been simple to get it treated, but it took Kanashima some time to evade the police and find a back-alley doctor. The resulting necrosis forced him to get his hand amputated at the wrist.

And so, he swore revenge. Revenge against the officer who arrested his friends. He swore to make the officer who stole his right hand pay, no matter the cost.

"Mr. Kanashima gave a gun to someone. Actually, there was a little girl on the scene that day at the shootout. One of the cop's shots bounced off and killed the girl. When Mr. Kanashima found out, he gave a gun to the girl's old man. After that, it was just a mess. The old man shot the officer and his superior when they came to apologize. The superior died, but the officer didn't."

Jun was struck dumb at Daichi's mechanical recital. Zhang and Carlos looked disgusted. The others were as well, though some seemed wholly unaffected.

"Apparently, the cop left the force and ran away to this island. Mr. Kanashima was surprised. I mean, he gave up after the cop disappeared, and came back to the island himself—but it turned out the cop came here,

too. Mr. Kanashima never told me the cop's name, but he says that that's when he decided to get revenge again."

"Wait. Hold up. What's that got to do with killing people from the organizations? Are you gonna tell us that the cop's actually our boss or *Ei Daren* or something?" Carlos asked the question on everyone's minds, but Daichi shook his head with a dark look.

"No. Mr. Kanashima wants to make that cop suffer, he says. If the cop ran away to this island and tried to find a new life here—"

With a deep breath, Daichi looked Jun in the eye and continued.

"—then he would break the island itself."

Something ran down Jun's spine, then.

The moment she understood what Daichi was saying, a certain emotion flitted past her every nerve.

"Break...the island?"

Parroting Daichi, Jun swelled with emotion.

"Wait, wait. That's one hell of a leap of logic. Is he nuts? Or does his name seriously mean he thinks on a galactic scale⁵? He find aliens and reach enlightenment or something?"

"Hey, Hawaii. You'd better not be pulling this out of your ass."

Carlos and Zhang grilled Daichi in their own ways, but Daichi was the picture of gravity. He did not seem to be lying. And he had no reason to be lying, in his position.

The Guard Team went silent. Jun quietly stood.

She tried to pinpoint the emotion boiling inside her.

Was it anger? Or was it sadness and frustration at becoming involved in something so petty?

⁵ The word 'Ginga' means 'galaxy' in Japanese.

Or was it fear of losing the island?

Jun was one of the first residents of the island.

Since the moment she was taken in by Gitarin and the Eastern District's organization was created, she had been a local.

The island was where her father died. The island had killed her father. The island was one with her father.

Initially, she had just wanted to quietly watch over the island's future.

Then, she slowly began to realize that what she truly wanted was not to watch over the island. Her wish was to protect the island from anyone and anything that would harm it.

The engine that swallowed her father continued to rumble at the center of the island.

That meant her father continued to live on the island, along with the engine.

So the engine must never be stopped.

She must protect the island.

Those emotions piled together until, finally, she applied to join the Eastern District's Guard Team.

Unlike the other members, she joined with the true, firm determination to protect the island.

"...I'll be back."

When she stood fully, Jun spoke with utter calm.

Her blank eyes were no longer terrified. They were filled with a force of will.

"...Where are you going?"

"Umm...I...I want to find Mr. Kanashima..."

"How?"

"Oh."

All it took was a cold question from Zhang to bring Jun back to her senses, at least for the moment. He must have noticed her state because he refrained from criticizing her as he usually did.

"If you wanna catch this Kanashima bastard, you just have to round up anyone with a prosthetic hand."

"You can't. Prosthetics these days are really good, and Mr. Kanashima's is one of the better ones. You couldn't tell even if you touched it, and you can barely see where the prosthetic ends and the arm starts. And his even had functional fingers."

It sounded like something out of a sci-fi film. Because there were no prosthetic technicians of that caliber on the island, Kanashima had probably gotten his hand in Japan or overseas.

Zhang clicked his tongue. Carlos interjected.

"Why don't you just take us to the guy?"

"Weren't you listening? Kanashima and the Rats don't have an HQ. They call this chump and tell him where to go, so there's no point going in ourselves."

"Really? Then what if we get this guy to ask Kanashima to meet up?"

This time, Daichi replied with a teary grimace.

"I tried calling him a while ago, but his phone was off. He must've figured out I got caught."

Carlos spread his arms dramatically, indicating a loss. Zhang cracked his arms as he stood.

"Well...looks like it's murder time."

"Ack! What?!" Daichi shrieked at his sudden death sentence, his eyes turning to dinner plates. "W-wait a second! You didn't say you'd kill me!"

"But we don't need you anymore, chump," Zhang said mercilessly. Daichi struggled in vain—

But he was rescued by the leader of the band of thugs.

"You can't, Mr. Zhang."

"...I know. I was just messing with him."

Jun, holding Zhang's arm, was completely calm. Her usual frightened look was gone. The danger the island was in gave her no room for weakness.

"Umm...if there's anything else, please tell us anything you know." She asked Daichi gravely. He managed to calm down, and after a moment's thought, hesitantly spoke.

"Well...about Nejiro—the leader of the Rats..."

"Yes."

They had heard the name during the interrogation. Nejiro was the boy in white who had killed the Eastern District executive that evening and was spotted by Misaki.

"He says he's gonna go for the Eastern District boss alone tomorrow. Uh... you know how tomorrow's the casino's re-opening day? He says he's gonna sneak in alone and—"

"You're supposed to tell us that from the *beginning*, you little shit!" Zhang roared. Daichi flinched and screamed again.

"Calm down, Mr. Zhang!" Jun said, patting the outraged wrestler on the back, and urged Daichi to continue.

"H-he always works with a few of his buddies. He's a careful kid, you know. But I can tell him and his friends apart from brats who aren't his little mice."

That was a new fact.

"I can tell them apart. I swear I can! But if I did that...no. You know what? I'm already as good as a traitor. I'll pick 'em out for you, so I just have one request. Please...please protect me from them and Mr. Kanashima!"

It was a shameless offer.

But if he could recognize the Rats—a group numbering at over 50—Daichi was already an asset to the Eastern District.

In other words, he had been saving his best card for the best moment to negotiate.

"Not bad," Carlos said with a chuckle. Zhang stared at Daichi, stunned.

Jun thought for a moment about the offer.

Then, she smiled and replied in a gentle tone.

"How about a game of rock-paper-scissors?"

"What?"

Daichi stared as Jun untied him.

"In this team, we decide on the captain with a rock-paper-scissors tournament. That's how I became captain. So let's play three rounds. If you win, I'll protect you. If you lose, we'll hand you over to our executives and let them do what they like with you."

It was a cruel offer packaged in a friendly smile. The executives, who lost a friend, would not so easily let Kanashima's subordinate go. They would not sit and do nothing, unlike Gitarin. And even if Daichi won the match, he might be disposed of once his usefulness was at an end.

But he might have a chance to escape if he won the game.

Daichi tried to figure out what Jun was thinking, but her eyes were completely concealed behind her bangs.

'*Can she even see me?*' He wondered out of the blue, but he quickly waved the thought aside and held out his right hand.

To begin with the conclusion, Daichi won all three rounds.

"Oh...I lost. I'm sorry, everyone. I hope you don't mind," Jun struggled to say. But the others exchanged glances and grinned.

"What can we do? Jun lost, fair and square."

"Talk about lucky."

"Can't argue against rock-paper-scissors."

Of the Guard Team, however, Zhang alone shook his head expressionlessly.

"Why'd you throw the match?" He asked Jun upon calling her behind the office.

"Um...I have no idea what you're talking about..."

"I know you played later than him. Everyone else does, too. The Guard Team's full of idiots, but they don't have eyes for nothing."

Jun had already known that.

Her victory rate was already suspicious to begin with even if no one noticed how she won, so it was understandable that the others might begin to wonder.

"...I'm sorry."

"Don't be. If there was anything to apologize for, we'd have blown your trick out in the open ages ago."

Not understanding Zhang's intentions, Jun said nothing. He did not wait for her to reply.

"Why'd you lose."

She remained silent, but eventually opened her mouth.

"...I just don't want anyone to die. I'm sorry. I don't deserve to be captain. How could a leader be so passive?"

"Don't apologize. Who cares? I mean, we're not a military. It's not about killing. We're supposed to be *protecting* people. If we can kill to protect—that's important, yeah. But that's not part of the equation today."

"...I lost because I thought that...everyone would understand if I did things this way..."

Jun hung her head. Zhang anxiously spoke.

"Hey."

But he wasn't truly angry. He was simply frustrated with Jun's obliviousness.

"You'd better apologize about that."

"Pardon?"

"Listen up. None of us says anything about your trick because we all accept you as our leader! You don't need to pull stupid stunts like that—you can just tell us, 'I don't want to kill him', and we'll all grin and nod! Not a single one of us is gonna laugh at you! ...But if you act like that, we all feel bad cause it feels like you're worryin' over us."

He sighed and looked Jun in the eye.

"You gotta trust your subordinates more."

"...I'm sorry."

Jun apologized again, but there was a world of meaning in her words this time. Yet in that mass of emotion and thought, there was not a drop of sadness.

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Zhang. To you...and everyone else."

"Hey...look. I'm the only one who worries about stuff like this. So you don't need to apologize to the rest." Zhang said, turning to get back to the office. But then he looked back. "Tomorrow, we're gonna protect the boss properly. We'll show 'em what we're made of. Got it?"

"Yes!"

The whirlwind of thoughts and emotions in Jun had vanished without a trace.

Free from her burdens, she remembered her mission.

The Guard Team did not protect just the boss and the executives.

They—and she—existed to protect the island itself.



The Western District. A suite in the Grand Ibis Hotel.

Aboveground in the Western District was a hotel that had, unfortunately, been already completely furnished when construction was halted. The hotel's name was 'Ibis', and it was currently the Western District's organization's castle.

"Yes... I understand."

In a suite on a higher floor, Yili—an executive of the district—stood with her ear pressed to the receiver.

Though the room paled in comparison to the royal suite, it was still luxurious enough to be the best suite in any other hotel. But the luxury had not been there from the beginning.

The interior was furnished with Chinese-style furniture and ornaments, clashing heavily with the hotel exterior. The ornaments wore splashes of primary colors, and the furniture was an artful combination of curves and lines that, for all their beauty, did not look too lavish. The room was decorated just enough to strike a balance. There was little hint of either deficiency or opulence in the luxurious suite.

A woman in a *qipao* sat in a bamboo chair in the middle of the room, her fingertips elegantly set against a phone receiver. Her skin, fair as ceramic, reflected the lights from the lamps. Even in the act of holding the receiver she looked like she was in a film.

"Yes. I know. It will all come together tomorrow."

There was something ominous in her words. She was speaking in Japanese, indicating that she was not talking to a fellow Western District executive.

"I'll convince Ei Daren. You have nothing to worry about."

With a coy smile, she imagined the face on the other side of the conversation.

"Then I will look forward to tomorrow."

The other party must be smiling as well, Yili was certain.

After all, she could not help smiling herself when she thought of tomorrow.

Even if that smile belied a sinister plot.

"I look forward to annihilating them in one fell swoop."

And morning came to the island once more.

With the casino re-opening about to begin, and the thoughts of many concealed behind its doors—

第5章
『金島銀河と風の王』



Chapter 5: Ginga Kanashima and the Rat King

Daytime. The hotel by the theme park in the Eastern District.

It seemed to be a day like any other.

People came and went by the theme park entrance, and children played chasing around dogs.

Many people in the area lived in the buildings around the theme park, and pseudo-businesses like food stands popped up in the summertime.

However, few set foot in the theme park itself and the nearby hotel. The locals knew that they were the headquarters of the Eastern District's organization, and were in silent agreement that they should not trespass.

However, the underground area of the hotel was an exception. It was one of the most lavish places on the island.

The underground casino that had opened several years ago.

All one needed to enter was money and basic etiquette.

With those two possessions, anyone could set foot in that 'paradise'. Many came all the way from the mainland upon hearing rumors, some being so-called 'heavyweights'—both inside and outside the law.

But depending on the outcome of their gambles, 'paradise' sometimes turned to 'hell'.

Going broke on the island meant that everything would change.

Those who had already been living on the island didn't have much to fear—they already knew how to live on nothing on the island.

But if someone who visited the island for the first time out of curiosity happened to lose everything—and even go in debt to the Eastern District's organization—they were set to face hell, in more ways than one.

They were abandoned in the unfamiliar world of the island without a single yen—the only commonality between the worlds. They were left with no idea

what to do. When they heard that leaving the island by ship cost money, they would turn to the bridge—but end up wander the labyrinthine streets with the words ‘easy pickings’ practically painted on their backs, being attacked by thugs and left to experience the hell of the island like a bird with broken wings.

In that sense, the casino was a place for lucky locals who happened to walk away with a profit or heavyweights of the outside world who had an endless supply of money to spend.

The casino had been closed for renovations for a month or so, but the re-opening was finally here.

Today was a pre-opening day for invited guests only, and there was even a small ceremony planned.

Although the executive in charge had been murdered, the planning process had already left his hands. His death did not affect the opening.

There were two ways into the underground from the hotel entrance. There were also four other doors leading to the casino from the underground, but those were closed except in case of emergency.

Though there was no need to worry about the police like on the mainland, that also meant they had to employ strict security measures. Like placing metal detectors at the entrance.

Four members of the organization stood at each of the hotel’s entrances, running quick checks on the invited guests.

Zhang and Daichi were on standby on the roof of a nearby building, watching from the distance. Because the building was positioned diagonally from the hotel, they could see the hotel entrance where the casino was.

“Shit. So those guns can get past metal detectors.” Zhang hissed, munching on some jerky for lunch.

Next to him was Daichi Tsuchimi, whose arms and legs were bound. He squirmed on the floor like a caterpillar.

“I doubt they’d be stupid enough to let some kids into the place, but just making sure—those Rats are 16, 17 tops, right?”

"Right. Fifteen or 16 at most, I'd say. At least, that's what they looked like. But I don't know exactly."

"Then this'll be easy. None of the guests we invited are that young."

Next to them was a monitor that displayed a surveillance feed. They could even keep an eye on the casino interior from the rooftop. Zhang and Daichi would remain on standby there, and the latter would scan for Rats or Kanashima's subordinates. If they found any, they would contact Carlos—hiding in a sniping box inside the casino—or the other members, who had infiltrated the building.

"Now...let's see how this Nejiro kid manages to sneak into the party."



Meanwhile, the casino employees were rushing to and fro.

There was a large, open space between the games in the casino. Though normally the space was empty, today it was taken up by a white table.

Guests in expensive suits and dresses were around the table, but from the looks of their clothes they did not seem to be from the island.

The guests were not very tense; those who already knew one another were engaged in elegant discourse.

Misaki served cocktails to the guests who had arrived—mostly Eastern District executives—and collapsed over the counter in exhaustion.

"Y-you idiot! What do you think you're doing?!" Inamine chastised her. Though also tired from greeting each and every guest in the casino, Inamine refused to fall.

"Boss...it's just been one thing after another. I didn't get a wink of sleep last night."

All she had to do was serve cocktails to the island's heavyweights. But that was harder than a thousand-mile hike for Misaki. Perhaps she wouldn't be so

exhausted if the guests were ordinary politicians—but these were members of the criminal underworld. One slip of the finger, one ruined suit could mean a knife to the throat.

It was an exaggerated example, but a realistic one in Misaki's eyes. More so because she had seen a man die the previous night. If she weren't already used to living on the island, the incident might have scarred her for life.

But that didn't mean she could slack off on the job. Scanning the casino, Inamine gave her another task.

"Oh! Hey, Misaki. The boss is here. Get him a cocktail."

Gitarin—head of the Eastern District—stood in the distance.

The man of ambiguous ethnicity was wearing a patterned black-and-white tuxedo, and was chatting amicably with the guests. A pair of beautiful women clung behind him, smiling as they thoroughly surveyed their surroundings.

"Eek."

"No squealing. Go on, get him his cocktail!"

Pulling Misaki upright before she fainted from shock, the manager returned to scanning the casino.

"...Huh?"

It was then that Inamine realized something and took a closer look around the hall.

"Wait."

Something suspiciously ominous was beginning to boil in the manager's thoughts.

"Where are all the Western District guests?"



At that very moment, Zhang noticed something concerning on the monitors.

Children were kicking around a soccer ball in an underground corridor that led into the casino. It was not an unusual sight by any means, but the children bothered him. Because the entrance to the casino hall was right next to the soccer game, from a different angle both the children and the entrance might come into view.

Perhaps the Nejiro boy was among the children.

When Zhang switched to another entrance, he saw yet another group of children amidst the people, playing soccer.

Something cold ran down his spine.

'Did the kids around here always play so much soccer?'

The children shown on the four cameras were all absorbed in their games.

"Hey, is that Nejiro kid somewhere in here?" He asked, dragging the incapacitated Daichi toward the monitor.

Daichi stared into the hi-res feed for a moment before exclaiming, "oh! Here, this kid on the top left. He's a Rat!"

"Good."

As Daichi pointed at the upper left part of the screen with his chin, Zhang prepared to contact Carlos and Jun.

But—

"And this one, too! On the right!"

"Figures they wouldn't just send in one kid. ...Yeah, Carlos? We found the brats. They—"

"And the one who just kicked!"

'Three? Shit. They're serious 'bout offing the boss. A full frontal assault, eh?'

"And, umm...this kid on this screen, too..."

'What?!"

<Hello? Which kid? I mean, not like they'll make it into the casino, but...huh?
Hello? Everything all right, Mr. Zhang?>

"A-and this one! And that one!"

Daichi's enthusiasm slowly dissipated. As though staring at an eerie object, he watched for some time before finally going silent altogether.

Zhang also was rendered mute.

As he watched the image on the screen change, he eventually managed to work up a trembling voice.

"No way..."

Before he knew it, the screen was filled with dozens of children.

They kicked the soccer ball into the distance, and slowly began to walk toward the door to the casino.

"What the fuck is going on here? You pullin' one over on us?!" Zhang roared, grabbing Daichi by the collar, but even the latter seemed flabbergasted.

"N-no way! How could you be so rash—d-don't you have *any* security in those passages underground?!"

"Come to think of it...the Western District's Guard Corps was supposed to be taking care of the underground—"

The realization struck him then. The Western District, which was in charge of part of the security, was nowhere to be found. And as though they knew from the beginning, the children were gathering only in the unguarded underground corridors.

Reaching a certain conclusion, he brought his radio up to his mouth.

"Carlos. Are there any Western District goons on your end?"

<Finally, you're talking again. Lemme check...no. There aren't any. I don't see anyone from the Western District. Everyone here's from Eastside.>

His suspicions confirmed, Zhang dropped Daichi and asked him another question.

"Hey. Does Kanashima have connections with the Western District?"

"No, he doesn't! I told you, he's trying to get revenge on a guy *in* the Western District. As if he'd join up with them!"

"Then what about the Rats?"

"Wha..."

Daichi hesitated. Zhang pushed further.

"What if the brats are buddies with someone *other* than Kanashima?!"

Without waiting for an answer, Zhang immediately turned to the radio.

But it was too late.

He could hear Carlos's voice.

<Huh? Hey, that door's not supposed to...open... What? Wait.>

His confusion was clear over the speaker.

On the monitor before Zhang, dozens of children were walking in through a door that was supposed to be barred.

<So...which one am I supposed to shoot first?>



Inside the casino.

Misaki felt like crying by the time she served a cocktail to the most powerful man in the Eastern District. But that was when, out of the corner of her eye, she saw a door opening.

"Huh?"

'Wait. That door shouldn't be opening. I mean, if anyone could waltz in through the emergency exit, there's no point in having the metal detectors at the entrance.'

But a second later, countless children swarmed into her line of sight.

Boys and girls dressed in scruffy clothing, a poor fit for the casino.

'Huh? What's going on here? Why're kids—kids...kids...?'

In her daze, the word repeated itself over and over like an echo in her head.

As though her brain was raising an alarm.

The casino's patrons began to notice the children sweeping in from four different doors.

A low murmur filled the hall. But the children paid it no mind as they walked along the walls.

And by the time several of them came near her, Misaki realized that they were holding things in their hands.

She began to break out of her daze. And the moment she spotted the grey, toylike guns in the children's hands, she remembered everything.

'No way...it's just like yesterday...!'

Her every cell screamed at her to flee.

But it was too late.

One of the children near her held out his arm as though offering a handshake.

And in his hand, pointed directly at Misaki's face, was a toylike handgun—the Rat.

The boy grinned and said blankly,

"You better not move, lady."

Her face frozen, Misaki stopped in her tracks. She eyed her surroundings and spotted Inamine surrounded by three children.

Yet it felt like she alone was left out of reality.

She had been held at gunpoint before, but never had the casino been held up by 50 people at once, let alone 50 children. Child robbers were not uncommon on the island or the mainland, but no one imagined that a group of children would assault a casino run by a criminal organization.

For a moment she thought that they had come to silence her. But Misaki heard that the Hawaiian shirt man from the previous night had already spilled everything there was to know about the Rats. Then the children had no reason to come for her.

When her questions piled together at the center of her thoughts, she mustered a surprisingly calm voice as she asked the boy who held her at gunpoint,

"What...are you guys...doing?"

Neither mocking nor ignoring her question, the boy replied in a monotonous voice.

"We're here to kill. To kill the Eastern District people here."

And without so much as blinking, he also revealed the mastermind behind the plot.

"That way, the people from the Western District will be happy."



"Carlos, you nitwit! Do something!" Zhang demanded over the radio, watching the incident through the monitor.

The Rats moved as though circling the hall, surrounding everyone inside. The guests did not seem to have noticed anything amiss yet—they were not panicking.

<Easy for you to say.>

"Forget it and shoot them all."

<No way. If I shoot one, the casino's gonna turn into a Tarantino flick before I get the second shot,> Carlos explained coolly.

"Like I give a shit!" Zhang roared loud enough to pop his own veins. "The execs must have guns or something! What're the idiots outside doing?!"

<They gave up the guns at the metal detector. The boss is probably the only one who could've brought one in. And look. Even if they want to contact outside, they're all held at gunpoint here...might be faster if I just ran over there myself.>

"Fuck! Where's the captain and the rest?!"

<I can't reach them.>

Zhang felt a chill run down his spine. Jun and the others were not such easy prey, he knew, but the army of 50 could have destroyed them all in the five minutes they had been out of contact. Zhang tried to radio them again and again, but Carlos was the only one to respond.

'Wait. Wait. Wait. Calm down.'

Focusing his efforts into regaining a sense of tranquility, Zhang wrapped his fingers around the railings on the rooftop.

Tightening his grip hard enough to bend the metal, he raised his head and turned to Daichi.

"Hey! Which one of 'em is Nejiro?! I'll get Carlos to—"

"He's not there."

Daichi replied before Zhang could finish.

"...What?"

"Nejiro...he's always wearing this eye-catching white outfit. But I don't see him! Not in the casino, not outside, not anywhere!"

"Maybe he's wearing something different!" Zhang proposed desperately, but Daichi shook his head.

"No. I remember his face perfectly. Just what the hell is going on here?!"

"That's my line!"

'Calm down. Calm down. Calm down. Calm down. Calm down.'

The railing in his hand crunched as it crumpled.

Turning his frustration and anger into strength, Zhang desperately tried to lower the pressure in his head.

But, as he calmly went over the facts in his head, he noticed that something was off.

"...Wait."

'Things are going way too well for these kids.'

The suspicion began to balloon uncontrollably in his thoughts.

'Even if the Western District gave 'em a hand, we're no pushovers. So how did the kids take over so easily? Is it even possible for Carlos to be the only Guard Team member—or bodyguard—with guns on hand? The other execs' goons are watching through the same cameras, so why aren't they rushing into the casino?'

One conclusion after another flooded his mind. Erasing every unnecessary thought, Zhang desperately struggled to find the truth behind his current predicament.

And his conclusion was—



"You know...Nejiro says that once we kill all the executives here, the Eastern District is finished. The boss will die and no one will trust him anymore."

Like a machine the boy spoke, setting aside all emotion.

"I'm sorry, I'm not an executive," Misaki pleaded, cowering before the child.

It was only then that the boy holding her at gunpoint finally spoke for himself.

"Nejiro told us to kill everyone. You were just unlucky, lady."

'Unlucky?'

'Unlucky'.

With that word as the trigger—the word she used to justify herself—Misaki was instantly dragged back to reality.

'I'm going to die because of something I can't even see or touch...because of bad luck?'

By thinking herself unlucky, she was always able to accept her world and her position. That was the way of life she had chosen on the island.

But it was the first time that her misfortune itself had told her, 'you were just unlucky'. Only when she heard those words from the source of her misfortune did she realize how hypocritical that statement really was.

'No. This isn't bad luck or something that petty. I'm not being held at gunpoint by bad luck. I'm going to be killed by these kids—these little murderers!'

What spiraled through her heart was rage.

Though she always thought her life had been controlled by luck, she now clearly saw herself being played like a fiddle by an absurd situation.

That anger overpowered her fear and allowed her to return the boy's empty gaze with a sharp glare.

"So how does that help you? What...what are you trying to do?"

The boy thought for a moment at the unexpected question. Then—

"We want to...escape the island."

"...What?"

"We all hate this island so much. But if kids like us want to leave, we need power. So we're going to get that power and escape. We're going to escape from this awful world."

Misaki was silent at the child's answer.

The island was indeed an awful place. She knew that well, which was why she had always excused herself with bad luck as she lived there.

But not everyone on the island lived that way.

Her friend Jun had chosen to live on the island, and was trying to protect it. And the children before her were trying to destroy that life for their own selfish reasons.

Unable to accept it, Misaki shot the boy a fierce glare.

"You guys can't do it."

"...What?"

"You'll never escape the island."

The boy was silent at her conclusion. And before Misaki knew it, the children who were holding Inamine at gunpoint were also looking in her direction.

"You guys are all part of this island. There's no one more like this island than you...so you'll never escape this place on your own!"

With that, Misaki reached back and grabbed a bottle of alcohol from the countertop.

'I just have to take his gun.'

She was being reckless, but Misaki did not hesitate. Ironically enough, she acted to escape her old self—the one who left herself to chance—to face an unchangeable fate—

But, as luck would have it, the bottle slipped right through her sweaty fingers.

Drawing a beautiful arc as it flew off behind the boy, it shattered loudly.

As if on cue, the children pulled the trigger.



Underground, at the center of the island, an engine too massive for the boy in white to see at once hummed and shook the air.

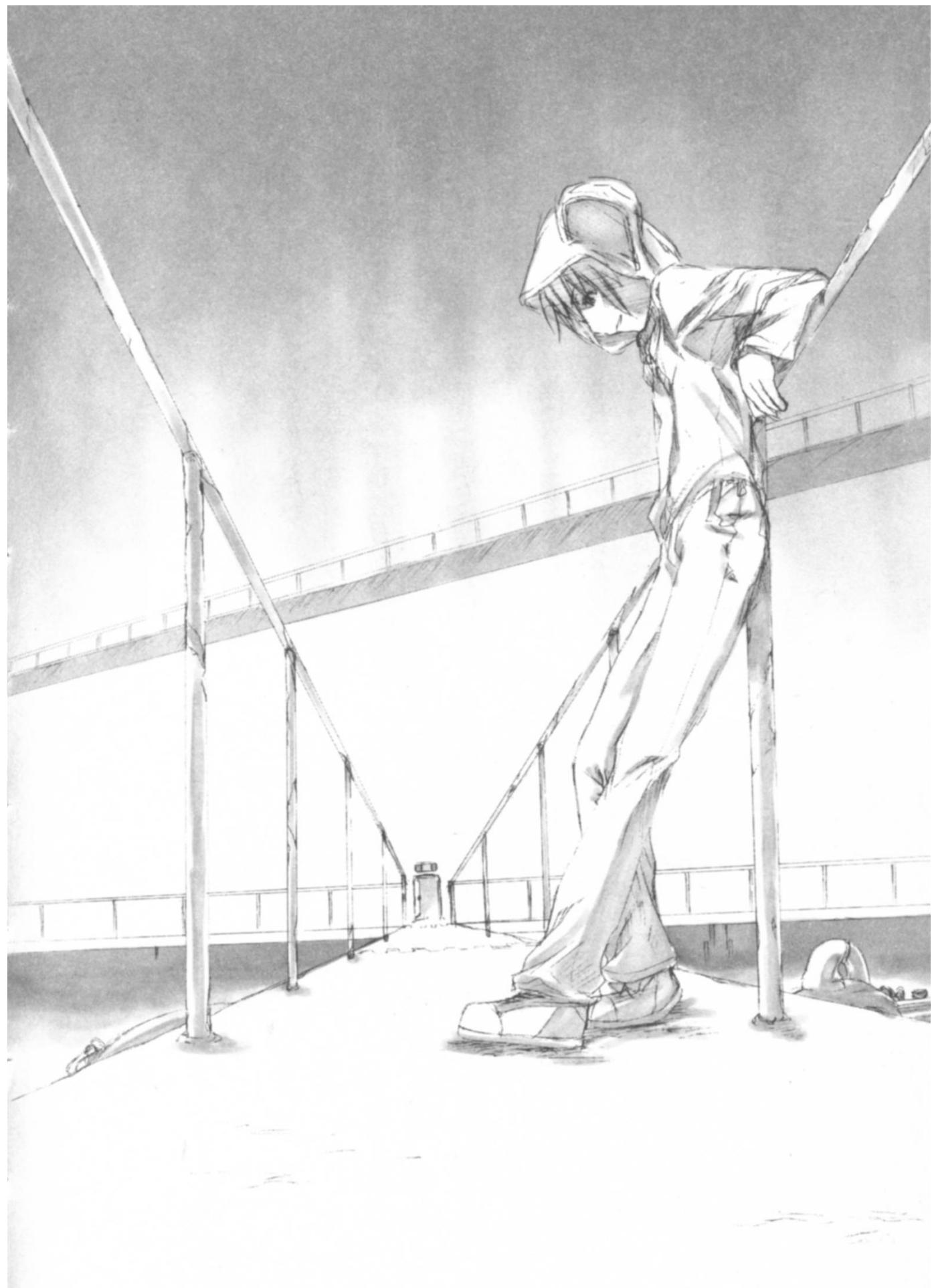
The island was a floating one in the truest sense of the word, as its base did not touch the sea floor. Built on theories developed 15 years prior, the artificial island had to remain parallel to the bridge no matter the state of the tides.

And of the components that were in charge of directing the island's movements was this monstrous engine.

It was, symbolically, the heart of the island.

There were catwalks in the massive underground space from where the engine came into view. The metal walkways hugged the inner walls of the chamber. The machinery would not be out of place at a steel manufacturing plant, but at the bottom of the chamber was not a furnace, but a warm engine.

Leaning against a railing by one of the entrances, Nejiro looked into empty space.



Imagining what was happening at the casino, he smiled quietly and said—
“Goodbye.”



The guns fired nothing.

In the casino, the children pulled the triggers.

Each gun was pointed at the executives they were surrounding, and the largest number of guns were aimed at the boss of the Eastern District. Not even his escorts, who stood protectively before him, could defend him from every shot.

Yet the inevitable never happened.



“Goodbye,” Nejiro whispered.

With a dry chuckle, he mumbled—

“Goodbye, Rats. Goodbye, everyone.”



There were clicks. The sound of the hammer falling in every gun. However, the logical next step never took place—the sound of gunfire muffled by the built-in silencers.

“...Huh?”

The children pulled the triggers over and over again, but none of the guns fired.

Muttering like a chorus of insects, the children exchanged glances.

Though their lives were in danger, their expressions did not change much. They accepted their situation while wondering *why* they were in that situation. That was all.

"What's happening?"

"Why won't they fire?"

"Maybe they're empty?"

"But we loaded the bullets Nejiro gave us."

"That's weird."

"What do we do?"

"What can we do?"

"We have to ask Nejiro."

"Where is he?"

"Not here."

"Nope."

"What do we do?"

"What can we do?"

Neither anxious nor afraid, the children whispered lethargically.

They showed no hint of tension as they whispered, almost like they were one step removed from the predicament.

Watching them, the boss of the Eastern District finally broke his silence and spoke with an awkward chuckle.

"Say, kids."

He reached out to the children, sounding a little older than he looked.

"Why don't we save the wondering for later?"

Then he raised his hand. The six casino doors opened in unison.

Behind each door, five or six people were on standby. They stood blocking the children's way out.

They were members of the Eastern District's organization and the Guard Team members whom Zhang had lost contact with.

"After all, you kids are going to have a very, very long time to think about what you've done. It's up to you whether you regret it or come to an answer or something."

The grin on his face was a cruel one; a perfect contrast to the faint smiles of the children.



"...Since when?"

At the same time, on the rooftop of the building diagonal to the casino, Zhang spoke quietly into the radio.

<Hmm...this morning, I'd say. We got word from the boss himself and everyone got together a little earlier.>

With his eyes fixed on the monitor, Zhang quietly continued to question Carlos.

"...And I was the only one out of the loop?"

<That's right.>

He could hear Carlos suppressing a laugh behind the radio.

With that, all of his suspicions were confirmed.

"...So you let them into the casino to nip things in the bud?"

<Everyone knows you gotta set out bait if you want to catch some rats. Now that we have proof the Western District betrayed us, we just have to find the mastermind and presto!>

Finally understanding everything, Zhang replied,

"...I owe each and every one of you seven Vertical Suplexes."

It sounded like a joke, but his voice was not comical in the least.

Upon hearing the unusually specific threat, Carlos snickered evasively.

<Heh heh. Jun wanted to tell you, y'know. Me and the boss had to stop her.>

"...Right. Jun's off the hook. The rest of you get eight—"

At that point, he realized something.

On the monitor, the Guard Team was taking the children into custody.

But someone important was missing.

"...Hey. Where's Jun?"

<She's gone off to work now.>

"Who the hell is she guard—"

Quizzically, he stood to lean against the railing—

<Well, she—...hey, you listening, Zhang?>

But Zhang did not answer.

The moment he turned, he saw something—and froze on the spot.

He was furious. Not at anyone else, but at himself and his own foolishness.

Before him lay pieces of rope.

Daichi Tsuchimi, who should have been tied up, was nowhere to be seen.

And strangely enough, the ropes seemed to have been cut with a sharp object.



"It must be about time."

The engine hummed heavily in the underground chamber.

Staring at his cell phone, Nejiro slowly stood.

The ceiling seemed endlessly far in the engine room. There were multiple levels of walkways overhead.

Noting that it was time for him to meet someone, he turned his attention from the engine to the rest of the chamber.

That was when the footsteps began.

"!"

The sound was approaching slowly, probably from the entrance just next to him.

Because there were no doors on the entrances in the chamber, Nejiro did not prepare anything in particular as he waited in stillness for the person to appear.

However, the one who appeared from the shadows was not the person he was waiting for.

"Hey."

He flashed a friendly smile and raised a hand.

"You..."

Shooting a suspicious glance at the man in the Hawaiian shirt, Nejiro called his name.

"Daichi...what are you doing here?"

"No, no. That's my line." Replied Daichi, stepping forward as he tilted his head, smile and all.

There were 10 meters between them. Though the engine rumbled, it was not loud enough to hinder their conversation. Daichi stuck his hands in his pockets as he slowly walked, leaning forward.

"You surprised me, kid. The Rats betraying Mr. Kanashima and sticking with the Western District, I could get. But—"

He took one more step, then stopped.

"—who'd have thought you'd sell all the Rats to the Eastern District?"

Nejiro did not answer.

After all, Daichi was absolutely correct.

"You're one crazy kid. You'd actually use your precious Rats like pawns. You took advantage of Mr. Kanashima's offer and made a profit—those guns."

Daichi shook his head, troubled, but the smile never left his face.

"And once you had your weapons, you didn't hunt down the organizations' people like he told you to. You immediately went to negotiate with the Western District."

"...Why would you say that? We killed people from the Western District, too." Nejiro asked, neither confirming nor denying Daichi's allegations.

"I looked into things myself. And surprise, surprise. The Western District people you killed happened to from the same faction. All eight of them. I thought the Eastern District was bad, but the Western District has it worse with the in-fighting."

Nejiro remained silent, quietly waiting for Daichi to continue.

Daichi noted his intent and continued.

"You pretended to follow Mr. Kanashima's orders to kill people from the organizations. But all along, you were working for the Western District. Your numbers aren't the only reason you could kill eight people from the infamously cautious Western District. They must have given you insider intel."

It was all conjecture—which also happened to be completely accurate.

With a hint of caution in his eye, Nejiro glared at the contact before him.

Until then he had thought of Daichi as human trash whom they could pick on with ease. But now he could sense the sharpened steel behind Daichi's grin.

"And your final mission was to attack the Eastern District's casino. That *should* have worked out, but you spilled the beans to the Eastern District's organization and sold them your friends. Along with your contact from the Western District."

Daichi finally paused, and waited for Nejiro.

For a time, only the rumbling of the engine filled the chamber.

Nejiro remained silent for a while, but eventually gave in with a sigh.

"...I guessed that the Western District would dispose of us once things were finished. So I sold the Rats to the Eastern District. Along with the 50 new guns I received from Mr. Kanashima," he replied, showing no concern for the other Rats. His white clothes and pale skin struck a stark contrast to his dark, muddy eyes. "But why are *you* here, Daichi? I heard you were captured by the Eastern District. And more importantly...*how* did you get here?"

With that question, Nejiro held out his right arm.

The barrel of the white gun in his hand was pointed straight at Daichi's head.

The gun had a short range, but at this distance it was close enough to fatally injure Daichi. Nejiro slowly walked forward to steady his aim.

Yet Daichi neither ran nor showed signs of fear. Though he had panicked the last time he was held at gunpoint, this time he remained deadly calm.

As Nejiro approached, Daichi slowly began.

"I managed to get out of there. And as for how I found you...there's something I never told you about your custom gun."

"What?"

Daichi's right hand seemed to twitch in his pocket.

At that moment, something in Nejiro's gun clicked.

"?!"

"Why do you think you got a special gun?" Daichi chuckled, and took out a cell phone from his pocket.

He flashed the screen at Nejiro.

"—so we could track you with the transmitter inside. If I'd known this was going to happen, I'd have snuck in a bug somewhere on that thing, too. But batteries have limits."

He began to walk again, faster than before. It was clear he wanted to corner Nejiro.

Sensing danger, Nejiro also moved.

Instead of stepping back or turning, he instantly pulled the trigger.

But nothing happened.

There was no click from the hammer, let alone the sound of gunfire.

"!"

"So what I did was rig the transmitter and the device that—well, simply put, all I managed to do was rig your gun so I could stop it from firing."

If Nejiro could not use his gun, he was lost.

The man he had always thought insignificant now seemed like a hunter after its prey.

In fact, Daichi seemed like a different person altogether. He was still serene, but everything under his skin had changed.

"You see...I'm here to punish you."

Nejiro instinctively understood—the being squirming in Daichi's skin was more dangerous than he could ever imagine.

It was only when he heard the ragged breaths from his own mouth that Nejiro realized he was panicking.

"I'm here to punish you for betraying Mr. Kanashima."

"Ah..."

The moment Nejiro made to run, Daichi kicked off the ground and closed in. Nejiro was taken by surprise and was caught in Daichi's left arm.

And immediately, he was pulled.

Daichi grabbed him by the collar and raised him into the air with ease. Nejiro was rather slender for his age to begin with, and Daichi had a strong build. Nejiro could not fight back.

But that did not explain Daichi's movements. His fighting style relied less on raw strength and more on timing and improvisation.

'This guy's not just a contact!'

By the time Nejiro realized the truth, he was in no state to retaliate.

When he kicked, all he managed was to dirty Daichi's shirt. When he tried to claw at Daichi's arm, it felt like his own fingernails would come loose first.

"I want you...to suffer."

The smile had long disappeared from Daichi's face. The fingers jammed against the boy's pale neck began to tighten their grip.

"You know why you lost? You and your friends held back your emotions. You went the wrong way the moment you refused to feel fear."

Hearing a sickening noise escape his own lips, Nejiro watched his world grow dim.

He looked around, desperate to call for help, but there was no one on the walkways above.

People should have been there to maintain the engine, but no one was likely to show up to get involved in a fight between a thug and an urchin.

His consciousness was half-gone now. Everything seemed quieter.

But then he noticed something.

It was in time with the massive engine, the heart of the island.

A keen, shrill, and tiny but vicious roar was filling the chamber.



"!"

Daichi heard the noise as well, but because the sound was bouncing off the walls, and because it was drowned out by the massive engine, he could not find the source.

He scanned his surroundings cautiously and took his hands off Nejiro's neck.

Nejiro lost his balance in his unexpected freedom. He staggered backwards and finally landed on his backside.

And as though getting in their way—

She descended.

Multiple walkways were suspended at different levels in the tall chamber.

Nejiro and Daichi were on the equivalent of the second level, as close as they could be to the engine on the first level.

Jun Sahara jumped from the third level just overhead.

She was only wielding one chainsaw. The other was still in its case. Twirling the saw in midair, she struck a careful balance as she landed.

For a moment, Nejiro thought her legs had been sucked into the floor.

As she landed, her legs absorbed the impact like a sponge and bent. Though she landed on the hard floor, she barely felt the shock.

She made a precise landing, like a cat jumping from a rooftop.

Standing between Nejiro and Daichi, Jun slowed her chainsaw and held its tip toward Daichi. At the same time, she took out her second saw and held it at Nejiro's neck as he sat on the floor.

The shriek of the chainsaw stopped, leaving only the rumbling of the engine.

With that, Jun spoke.

"...Umm...well..."

She sounded too unreliable and nervous for Nejiro's liking.

"You shouldn't fight. Let's see...your name's Nejiro, and *you* are..."

But then, her voice grew firm.

"—Mr. Ginga Kanashima."

Silence.

The rumbling of the giant engine alone seemed to be part of time as the rest of the world remained frozen.

A moment later, the man who called himself 'Daichi Tsuchimi' slowly opened his mouth.

"...How did you know?"



He was calm. He sounded deferential, but not pathetic—as he had been with Zhang earlier. With his courtesy he seemed to declare that he was the mastermind, his voice brimming with danger and pride.

Nejiro's eyes widened in shock.

With both chainsaws still trained on their targets, Jun smiled.

"Well...it was your hand."

"My hand?"

"When we played rock-paper-scissors yesterday, you reacted a beat later than most people. Usually people change their hand when we say 'scissors', but you were even slower than that. And...there's something awkward about the way your fingers move, too. So I thought, maybe...that your hand was a prosthetic."

"And the one who told you about Ginga Kanashima's prosthetic hand before the game...was me." Kanashima snickered, and looked at Jun.

Her eyes were still hidden beneath her bangs, but he did not sense anything ominous. She really must have simply made an educated guess.

Kanashima knew that he was not found out by chance. He had already been prepared to reveal his identity when he allowed himself to be captured the previous night.

Initially, he only intended to take back the gun that the casino employee took, but when he saw Jun he was overcome by curiosity. What was the Eastern District's Guard Team really like?

He wondered if they would torture him violently, but it was almost disappointing to see that they did not. And he was confident that even if, by some chance, he was threatened with death, he would be able to make it out alive.

That was why he was not unnerved that he had been discovered.

"Heh...it seems like I'll have to change my face again soon."

Confessing that he had gotten plastic surgery, Kanashima put a hand on the railing.

On the other side, naturally, was nothing. If he fell from there, he would land on top of the massive engine.

"But I'm surprised that a game of rock-paper-scissors was all it took."

"I've always been good at reading people's faces and their hands. ...The people on the island have very interesting expressions and move in fascinating ways. I never get tired of watching them."

Jun's answer was stilted, but Kanashima laughed.

"Aha...I expected nothing less from one of the island's first residents."

Cracking his own neck, Kanashima looked from Jun to Nejiro, then to Jun again.

"First...residents...?" Nejiro finally broke his silence.

"Yes. I looked into some things. Miss Sahara here has been on this island since the island was abandoned by the government—in other words, ever since this twisted city was created. She was taken in by the current boss of the Eastern District and raised like his daughter—or, considering his age, I suppose more like his sister."

"Umm...the boss and I aren't really family...we're more like a boss and an employee. I mean, I still don't even know his real name." Jun said, denying Kanashima's supposition, but he ignored her and changed the subject.

"So you chased me all the way down here. How'd you find me?"

Had they put a transmitter on him like he had with Nejiro's gun, Kanashima wondered. But he did not remember giving them time to do such a thing.

"Umm...I only found you by coincidence. I came here for work."

"Work?"

"Yes. The boss ordered me to...umm...find a boy named Nejiro here and escort him back..."

Nejiro turned again.

'This is the escort I was waiting for? The one from the Eastern District's organization? But she's just a girl.'

'I head rumors about the Guard Team captain fighting with chainsaws, but... are those really the only thing she fights with?'

'And what's this about her being one of the first residents? Is she one of the humans who created this rotten, hopelessly disgusting world?'

'I was abandoned because this island existed. If only it never existed, I used to think.'

'Maybe if I was still with the Rats, things would be different. I might not have resented her. But now...I've betrayed the Rats and sold them off to the people who control the island.'

'I sold my soul to the people who created this hell so I could get power to leave the island.'

'But even if I left...I'll never be able to live in the light. I know that. If I really want to escape this world, I need something even after I leave the island.'

'Power. It could be money or influence.'

'And if I want power, I have no choice but to join forces with them—the people who control the island, and the bastards who created this world. I groveled to those people and even betrayed the Rats because of that.'

'That's right. That's why the guard is here.'

'I didn't escape death at Daichi's—no, Kanashima's—hands by luck. I wasn't saved by coincidence. This is no miracle.'

'But I still have one question.'

'Will this girl protect me?'

'...But why is she holding a chainsaw at me, too?!'

Even as Nejiro screamed in his head, Jun did not lower her chainsaws.

Before the engines were customized, they each weighed about four to five kilograms. But once they were lightened, Jun's chainsaws weighed one or two kilograms at most. Yet that was not an insignificant weight for a woman to swing around, especially with one in each hand.

That was to say nothing of how exhausting it must be to swing them in the same forms constantly. Yet Jun did not shed a drop of sweat, holding one stopped chainsaw each at the two people on either side of her.

After a moment's silence, she turned to Kanashima.

"Um...Mr. Kanashima? We're supposed to be protecting you, too. I mean, you won the rock-paper-scissors match last night."

"Huh?"

"But I'm supposed to be guarding Nejiro here, too. So...because I don't know which one of you I'm supposed to protect...I'd appreciate it if you'd give up on fighting each other."

Though her eyes remained hidden, Jun seemed to be completely serious.

"...Hah. Hah hah. Ahahahaha!"

Kanashima gaped blankly—then, out of nowhere, he burst into laughter.

"Now this is unusual! I already told you, I'm not Tsuchimi anymore. I'm Ginga Kanashima. I can't believe you'd still hold up—"

"That's not the only reason," Jun interrupted gravely. "If it's true that you're trying to break this island to get revenge on one person...umm...I'd appreciate it if you'd give up."

Jun was clearly being serious. Kanashima stopped laughing.

A beat.

"AHAHAHAHAHAHAHA! HAHAHAHAHA! AHAHAHAHAHA!"

He howled like a madman, a complete 180 from the way he acted against Nejiro.

Even when he took off the mask of the foolish contact, when he was facing Nejiro he had still been in the mask of Daichi Tsuchimi.

As he removed his second mask, his hidden self—his twisted obsession and brutality—surfaced.

"This is a riot! I've never heard anything this outrageous in my life!"

Even his tone changed dramatically. Kanashima scrutinized Jun, fascinated.

"Listen up. Listen up, Missy! I told you I swore revenge. I'm an obsessive man. I came all this way to kill Nejiro for betraying me! So what point do you see in asking me to give up on the revenge I've wanted for years? And don't ask me to not drag in innocent bystanders. I don't care what happens to everyone else. That's the kind of guy I am. And I'm trying to break this island to make the son of a bitch suffer. So what do I get out of *giving up?* Hm?"

Jun was not shaken by Kanashima's inane rambling.

"Because it'll make me happy."

"...What?"

His crazed laughter came to a halt. Kanashima stared at Jun.

Only then did she lower her chainsaws and face Kanashima. As though defending Nejiro, who was still on the ground.

Looking into Kanashima's face, Jun declared once more, with confidence.

"If you give up on breaking this island...that would make me very happy."

Kanashima scrutinized Jun for a moment, before making an astonished face.

"That...doesn't benefit me at all."

"No, it doesn't," Jun agreed, as though the obvious answer was the logical one. "So this isn't a proposal or an order or anything like that. This is a request."

Kanashima was silent.

"I'm sure you already know, Mr. Kanashima. There are no official transactions on this island. They're not possible—I mean, there's no law here, and the people here don't have an ounce of pride. That's why we can only have something like mutual requests that people can fulfill for one another." Pausing, Jun began to wave her chainsaws. "I don't know how you feel, and I have no intention of asking you to give up on your revenge. And I won't tell you to stop hurting people because it's bad."

She placed her fingers on the power button.

"Because...if you won't accept my request, I'll stop you even if it means hurting you—or even killing you."

Kanashima realized that he had misunderstood his foe.

She was a good-natured Guard Team captain who wanted to protect everyone, he had assumed. But in reality, Jun could kill anyone without a second thought if they crossed a certain line.

At that moment, he stuck his left hand into his pocket and fixed his grip on the object in his right hand.

Kanashima operated the phone in his pocket without even taking it out. And a second later, the object in his right hand clicked.

It was a white gun—the one he had snatched from Nejiro earlier.

"Now it's ready to fire again..."

Slowly, he raised the white gun at the woman with the chainsaws.

But Jun did not seem afraid.

"You know this isn't a toy."

"...Yes. But if I were scared of a measly gun, I wouldn't be on the Guard Team in the first place."

"Is that so? You wouldn't be singing that tune if you knew fear."

Kanashima stared at her face, but it was impossible to tell which way she was looking.

"So...about my request..." Jun began. Kanashima chuckled—

"Here's *my* request. Die."

Before he even finished, he held the gun at Jun's face.

A second later—

The triggers for the chainsaw blade and the white gun.

Two triggers were pulled at once, and there was an ear-piercing, metallic scream.

Jun did not miss Kanashima's finger pulling the trigger.

At the same time, she read the angle of his shot and swung.

Something hard was deflected off a metal surface, for a second breaking the roar of the engines.

A moment later, both Jun and Kanashima had kicked off the floor and were charging at each other.

Kanashima put his feet on the railings and seemed to throw himself off the side, but forced his body back and leapt into the center of the walkway.

Countering his unusual movements, Jun spun around like a top.

And when the distance between them closed, there was a second metallic impact.



When she wielded the two engines, Jun was pushed to ecstasy.

Yet she retained the barest minimum of sanity as she countered her foe from the closest distance they reached.

'Follow the rhythm.

'Follow the rhythm.

'Follow the rhythm of the engines.

'Let the spinning rhythm carry my heart.

'Let the explosive rhythm carry my body.

'Faster.

'Faster.

'Faster than a knife.

'Faster than a bullet.

'Catch up to the commas in the engine's rhythm.'

'I am the engine.

'I am the engine.

'Dominate the movement of the engine.

'Become one with the engine.

'Feel the energy.

'Feel the energy—'

Having become an uninvolved third party, Nejiro silently watched the battle.

Though irregular, each and every move was completely efficient.

Jun swung her blades in a circle, even though her target was straight ahead.

She was even in control of the inertia, it seemed, as she never once slowed in her swings.

Meanwhile, Kanashima twisted and turned in unpredictable ways to confuse his foe.

He used the railings and the handrails like the floor under him, seemingly manipulating the laws of physics.

The two opposing styles meshed together in one flawless dance.

Fleeing to the end of the walkway, Nejiro watched the twisted battle—and even felt a sense of beauty in the scene.

He thought he had lost the ability to feel that way when he came to the island, but he was unable to tear his eyes away from the two combatants.

But the dance would come to an end with a spurt of blood.

After firing his seventh shot, Kanashima let go of his gun.

"?!"

Jun batted it away without thinking—and at that moment, Kanashima thrust his right hand at Jun's arm.

Afraid he would grab her arm, Jun quickly pulled back.

Their right arms passed each other, almost like a cross-counter.

Unable to grasp Jun, Kanashima's fingertips only grazed her arm—

But at that moment, the sleeve of her jacket tore, and line of red appeared on her fair skin.

A silent scream escaped Jun's lips.

She was still high on the sound of the engines and tried to ignore the pain, but her injured arm would not listen. All she could do was use her fingers to keep the chainsaw off the ground.

She could not put strength into her trigger finger. The engine in her right hand began to slow.

For the moment, Jun slowed the other engine and decided to see how her opponent would react.

When the roar of the engines weakened, Jun would lose momentum as well. Kanashima grinned and picked up his gun, making sure to keep his right hand cautiously trained on Jun.

The skin on his fingertip was torn, and a sharp blade the length of a finger stuck out from his hand. Noting that there was no blood on the tear, Jun remembered that Kanashima had a prosthetic arm.

Blood dripped from the tip, but the blade did not seem dulled by the impact.

"...This was the most I could cram in here without hurting the arm's capabilities. I'd have fit in a rifle or a cannon in here if I could," Kanashima snickered. The blade on his hand sang. "You've still got a chance to run."

He was provoking her. But Jun put words to her resolve:

"I won't. If I lose to you here, this island will break."

"Maybe you'll quiet down once your other arm stops moving."

"But I won't let you stop my engine."

"Then I'll just break your chainsaws, too."

Kanashima seemed as entertained as ever, but Jun was grimacing as the pain in her arm grew sharper. The agony seemed to stab at her spine in time with her pulse.

But her will was never broken.

"Even if you do...I won't stop. The engine will never stop."

Her timid attitude was gone. She cried out as if scolding herself.

"This island is my driving force. It's my engine! No one can stop this island from growing—no one can stop it from *living*. As long as this island keeps moving, I won't let it stop!"

It was hypocrisy, but she had absolute pride in her words.

Because that was the only way of life she found on the island.

Just as Misaki used misfortune as an excuse—just as Nejiro found strength in his rejection of the island—and just as Kanashima transformed his own twisted heart into a purpose—

Jun's choice was to live together with the island. Using the satisfaction of defending the island as her food, she gained the strength to live on the island. It was a symbiotic relationship that fed into itself.

And now, she had gained strength. Next to one of the world's largest power units—the unit that served as the island's symbol—Kanashima had declared that he would destroy the island. Jun could not lose.

"Why are you going so far for this island? ...Oh. I remember."

Kanashima's confusion was replaced by an impish grin as he turned to the great engine under the walkway.

"Nasty story, right? How your father got eaten by that engine? Don't you hate this island? Or are you channeling your inner eight-year-old and imagining that he's one with the engine now?"

He hit the nail on the head.

It was a twisted childhood fantasy—one she knew was a delusion but held onto all this time.

"Hah! So is this monster of an engine gonna turn into a giant robot to save you when you're in trouble?"

He was mocking her. But Jun was not cowed.

"No. But...the engine watches over me."

Shooting Kanashima a hard stare, Jun squeezed the trigger and filled the chamber with the biggest roar yet.

"Being able to think that way...that alone is worth believing in!"

Like water she flowed toward Kanashima. Her right hand hung limp, the spinning chain pointed at the floor.

"You're not gonna block anything with just one arm!"

With an icy smile, Kanashima pulled the trigger.

There was a muffled impact, and the first shot ricocheted off the chainsaw in Jun's left hand.

He made to land the second shot in Jun's back as she spun, but—

As though in revenge, Jun let go of the chainsaw in her left hand.

"?!"

The chainsaw was flying at him. Taken completely off-guard, Kanashima held up his arms without thinking.

An impact.

But what hit him was not the blade, but the engine and the fuel tank.

"Hah hah...Ahahaha! Too bad, Jun Saha—"

Splash.

At the moment of impact, he felt and heard something strange. A second later a certain stench stung his nose.

He looked down. A sticky fluid was spilling from part of the chainsaw at his feet.

After parrying the first shot, Jun had broken the fuel tank against the blade in her limp right hand before throwing the chainsaw at Kanashima.

"?!"

By the time he realized he was covered with a blend of easily flammable fuel, it was too late.

Jun lowered her right hand and struck the metal floor with all her strength.

The chain spun in overdrive, sending sparks flying everywhere—

And the sparks scattered all over Ginga Kanashima.

"-----!"

This time, it was Kanashima's turn to let out a soundless scream.

Jun did not miss her chance. She switched her chainsaw from her right hand to her left—

And spun right into Kanashima.

'The deaths of other people—'

As she prepared to end everything, Jun felt like the world was moving very slowly.

'The lives of other people—'

That moment, she would take away one man's existence, his past, and his life. Everything. Her thoughts were eerily calm, and in the world of slow-motion only her resolve flowed on at regular time.

The resolve to step into an unknown world—that is, to kill for the sake of the island.

'And even relationships between people—it's all part of this island.'

A blade filled with pure yet frighteningly deep resolve was slowly driven into Kanashima's shoulder.

'The moment we stepped onto the island—both me and him—we became a part of it.'

The fabric of the Hawaiian shirt was first dragged into the chain, and was soon dyed a deep red.

'So...if only this moment, I won't lean on excuses like wanting to protect the island.'

Staring at her reddened chain, Jun tasted her resolve.

'I'm cutting down this man for my self-satisfaction.'

'Because I don't want this island's soul to disappear. That satisfaction is all that drives me.'

'After all, this island's soul is its existence itself.'

The moment she came to that realization, time returned to her world.

And her chainsaw left a bloody trench in Ginga Kanashima's body.

Splashes of endlessly dark red.

The spurts of blood almost seemed to be dancing to the sound of the engines.



"Umm...can you walk?"

Nejiro hung his head.

Having seen an incredible display unfold before him, Nejiro flinched without thinking.

"Ahaha...I'm sorry for scaring you. But it's all right. I just have to take you to the boss's office now..."

Tearing off a part of her own shirt, she made a makeshift bandage for her arm.

Nejiro was at a loss. What was he to say to her? What was he to ask?

"Could I ask you a question?"

"Yes?"

But he had to ask—what he would always ask before he killed someone.

"Is there hope on this island?"

When he tossed out his question, he would usually kill his victim without waiting for a reply.

Perhaps he did so because he was scared to hear an answer.

But now, though he was in danger, he was finally holding something he could call hope in his hands.

He would join the Eastern District's organization and gain power. That wish was about to come true.

At this point, he could accept any answer he received.

That was what he had thought, but Jun's reply mystified him.

"Yes—but it disappears very quickly."

"What...?"

"You see, the island's real engine is the people on it. This island...it's an awful place that alternates between people's hopes and despair, using their lives and money as the fuel. But I'm still going to protect it. For my own satisfaction. To protect this island. For that petty feeling of satisfaction...I can become an awful person. But before you know it, this island will take away those hopes, too. So if you want to survive on this island...it'll be very hard for you unless you're always discovering new hopes."

He did not really understand what she was saying. But Nejiro did not feel like asking any more questions, so he listened.

Once she was ready, Jun quietly stood and began to walk with Nejiro's hand in hers.

"Well...let's go."

How many years had it been since the last time he was led by the hand?

There was a nostalgic warmth in Jun's hand, but in horror he quickly dropped the memory. But he did not let go. He continued to walk hand-in-hand with Jun.

As they walked toward the aboveground, Jun seemed to remember something.

"You know...this island may take away your hopes in the blink of an eye, but it's the same with despair. The island also takes away despair before you know it."

"What?"

"So...even if you despair, don't give up."

Her eyes on him were as warm as a protective family member—

"You'll understand soon."

—and also carried a tinge of sadness.

"...Soon."



終章
『ラツチ』



Final Chapter: Rats

Sunday. Somewhere on the island.

It was a disgusting place.

It was neither filled with garbage or human trash like the Pits, nor was it full of noxious poison and corpses.

There was simply nothing there.

It was a tiny space about the size of a small room, which had existed since the island's construction and had been forgotten when the island was abandoned.

It was connected to nowhere, and was not remarkable enough for anyone who happened by to remember.

It was one of the remotest branches of the sprawling underground passageways.

Beyond a mountain of rubble was a cracked wall and fallen pipes and scaffolding. A warm, musty breeze escaped the few vents at the tops of the walls. The ceiling was not very high, and there wasn't even a single cobweb in the desolate space.

Fluorescent lights seeped inside from the gaps between the walls and the ceiling, but it was no better than a crescent moon, let alone good enough to read by.

No one who lived a normal life on the island would climb over piles of rubble. The locals knew by instinct that that was just a waste of energy.

In a corner of that forgotten space, a boy sat leaning against the wall.

With his legs stretched before him, he stared into the darkness.

For hours and hours and hours—

Blinking blankly in the darkness, the boy in white could only think.

He thought about why he was in a place like this.

And why his legs no longer moved.



"Hey there. I suppose this is the first time we meet in person? Good, good. You look about the same as I imagined from your voice."

The boy hung his head before the man with the gentle smile.

The man looked him up and down as he chattered enthusiastically.

"Here I was worried that you might be a big lug like Zhang. No, no. I appreciate childlikeness. Looking at how mature you are, I'm not surprised Hiraiwa let his guard down. Ah, yes. Hiraiwa would be one of our executives. The one you murdered last night."

The man paused, then, and the boy felt beads of cold sweat on his back.

The boss's office was surprisingly plain.

The room was the size of a convenience store, with a few desks and bookshelves that made it look like an administrative office. There were sofas and a table near the door for entertaining guests, and in a corner of the room in front of a window was a wooden desk.

There was a computer and a phone on the desk, and mounted on the wall beside it was a large television.

They were in a hotel near the Eastern District's casino.

In a room near the top floor of the building, the boy in white faced the youthful man of ambiguous ethnicity.

Though he looked young, it was difficult to guess how old the man was. In some ways he seemed to be in his twenties, yet in other ways he seemed to be closer to middle-age.

Gitarin—the boss of the Eastern District—and Nejiro—the former leader of the Rats.

"We landed a big haul thanks to you betraying your friends. A whopping *fifty* of the newest model—we'd been bending over backwards to get our hands on 'em. And thanks to you, we now know for certain that the Western District is after us." Gitarin recited the facts, walking up to the boy. "Now, then...your reward *should* be membership with our organization, but..."

Then, with a quiet smile, he asked a mischievous question.

"Why are you so obsessed with power? With your control over your fellow Rats, you could have had a decently happy life on this island."

Nejiro hesitated, but he soon decided to confess everything. From how he was abandoned on the island, to why he sought power. That he wanted power that would take him back to the outside world—

"I see." Gitarin nodded and grinned. "If life were a cutesy fairy tale, there would be a church or an orphanage on the street corner, and children like you would have been raised with love by nuns or matrons. *But*. People that nice would never come to this island, is that it?"

Gitarin sounded snide, but Nejiro did not feel like retorting. Not only did that pose no merit, he also determined that he had no reason to talk back to his future employer.

"But then again, there's always exceptions. For example, Mr. and Mrs. Iizuka, who took in an orphan girl on top of all their kids. Or me, who took in a little girl playing with a chainsaw 10 years ago."

Nejiro was silent.

"However."

At that moment, the smile left Gitarin's face. His eyes changed visibly.

There was something dark in his green eyes; something far more sinister than anything Nejiro had seen in the eyes of the islanders—

"You say that the Western District is too exclusive, but that's only one aspect of their complexity."

As if on cue, the door opened behind Nejiro.

There stood a beautiful woman in a *qipao* and four suit-clad men behind her.

Nejiro did not reply. The woman spoke expressionlessly as though in his place.

"I appreciate your effort, Gitarin. So...is this the child?" The woman's expressionlessness was different from that of the Rats. It was not emptiness, but controlled emotion. "We'll take care of the traitors on our end, but what about you?"

Gitarin nodded.

"I did exactly what I said I'd do. We took the guns and set the little rodents free."

"...!"

What was going on? Nejiro had countless questions, but his throat was in no condition to squeeze out a voice at will. Perhaps he knew, instinctively, that he was in mortal peril.

"Now, Nejiro...there's some bad blood between the Western District executive you contacted and Yili here. To get to the point, all of the Western District people you killed were part of Yili's faction."

At that point, Nejiro understood everything.

To run, or to resist? Before he could even make a decision, he was pushed to the ground by the four men.

"Now, now. We're not going to kill you, if that's what you're worried about. If I remember correctly, we made a promise. But...we need you to take proper responsibility. After all, your very existence could be the trigger that sets off a conflict between our organizations."

"Oh? There's a very real chance he'll lose his life, Gitarin."

Nejiro now knew what was in store for him.

And when he realized his fate, he also noticed that he was surprisingly calm.

Looking up at Gitarin, he spoke in a sad tone.

"This is unfortunate. I didn't think you were this type of man."

He was trying to provoke sympathy. But Gitarin laughed sheepishly.

"Did you trust me? Or...did you doubt me endlessly until you decided that I was a trustworthy person?"

Nejiro was silent.

"The thing about doubt, you see...even if it was just a misunderstanding, and even if the misunderstanding was cleared up, doubt leaves behind something called guilt. Guilt about having doubted that person. And the thing about trust? When someone betrays you, it just might break you. I'm not kidding. Trusting or doubting someone takes resolve. And if you don't like that, you shouldn't be trusting or doubting people in the first place," Gitarin said quietly, as Nejiro remained silent.

There seemed to be something like sadness in the man's eyes. But was it sympathy for Nejiro? Or for himself? No one else could know.

"When you become connected to someone in any way, you will never not need resolve. You refused that resolve—you refused to be connected to this island. Maybe that's why this was your fate."

He stopped there. Nejiro looked up quizzically and asked,

"Are you a good person? Or a bad one?"

Gitarin slowly shook his head.

"That's for an objective observer like you to decide, don't you think? Although...the only *me* that you know is the *me* on this island."

"..."

"I received support from syndicates all around the world to maintain this island. I even lent a hand with money laundering. All the while knowing exactly what they would do with that money."

Confessing his own crimes, Gitarin nonchalantly described the kind of man he was from a mainlander's perspective. As though repenting to someone who was not there.

"If I had to decide, I would call myself a bad person. Rotten to the core. A hopeless villain who wears a good guy's mask on this island alone. Did you really not notice?"

Gitarin hesitated, but soon turned to Yili.

Understanding what he wanted, she nodded without a word.

Gitarin gave a relieved smile and revealed one of the island's secrets.

"You see, although the Eastern District is supported by more organizations you can count...one of them is the very same group that supports the Western District. In other words, we share roots."

Even Nejiro had never known that information.

According to Gitarin, the Western and Eastern Districts were links from the same chain, helping one another *and* fighting one another.

"This island is essentially a castle balanced miraculously on a massive ruse. That's why...I want to protect this work of art, no matter the cost. If I can keep this island safe, I can sell a new subordinate or two without even blinking."

Finally understanding the truth behind Gitarin's self-satisfaction, Nejiro felt like a fool.

In surrender he said nothing and quietly closed his eyes.

But Gitarin did not stop there.

As Nejiro prepared to accept even death, he drove in the final nail in his coffin.

"But...to a certain extent, you knew this might happen. Right?"

Nejiro was silent.

It was true. A part of him did suspect something like this might happen. But perhaps that part of him just didn't care.

Fear of death was not enough to stop him.

"Or are you thinking that, through death, you'll be able to escape this world?"

"..."

"Not just that, you're not trying to go back to your old world. What's waiting for you there? I think you just wanted to get revenge...on the people who used to be your mother and father."

Nejiro tried to retort, but his chin was pressed against the floor now. He could not move.

"Foolish. Just foolish. You wanted to escape this island more than anyone here—and you rejected this island more than anyone here—but you couldn't see the outside world."

Gitarin's voice just continued to fill his ears.

"Your group. 'Rats', you called it. It's a perfect name, if you think about it."

"_____"

"Albino lab rats were bred from common sewer rats. They were created by humans to be used in experiments."

The men's grips on Nejiro grew stronger. His consciousness grew faint as he listened to Gitarin. The sensation from when Kanashima tried to strangle him returned... But this time, the chainsaw woman would not come to help him.

"When you were abandoned in this city, you essentially made the other children—common sewer rats—into lab rats. But I admire that about you. If you manage to survive, I just might accept you as—"

Before Gitarin could even finish, Nejiro's vision went dark.

What happened afterwards was predictable.

His legs were broken in multiple places.

And he was abandoned somewhere on the island—a place forgotten by all.

And time alone continued to pass, little by little...



How many dozens of hours had passed?

Left alone in a forgotten space on an island abandoned by the world.

Sitting against the wall, Nejiro endured the agony and stared into empty space. Rather than call for help, he sat quietly in the dark with a blank expression.

He might have a chance; but he did not even try to take it.

'Even if I do make it out, what's waiting for me out there?'

He had manipulated everything, betrayed everything, and lost everything.

So what merit was there in surviving?

Unable to find an answer, he neither struggled to live nor took his own life as he allowed time to pass.

Perhaps Gitarin was right.

"Or are you thinking that, through death, you'll be able to escape this world?"

The words echoed in his mind over and over again.

'Maybe he was right. No matter how much money or power I have, maybe the original world would never take back someone who was abandoned.'

'Then why was I so obsessed with power?'

"You're not trying to go back to your old world. What's waiting for you there? I think you just wanted to get revenge...on the people who used to be your mother and father."

His words came back to Nejiro.

'Now that I think about it, he's right.

'Most of my knowledge of the old world was stuff I learned from my parents.'

He came to a realization.

The world he had so desired—the world that had abandoned him—he had always thought it was everything outside the island. But that wasn't true. The world he had wanted was just the world around his parents. To him, 'the world' was the parents who abandoned him.

In the darkness, he slowly closed his eyes.

"This...must be despair."

Finally, he remembered the words of the Guard Team captain who rescued him from Kanashima.

"You know...this island may take away your hopes in the blink of an eye, but it's the same with despair. The island also takes away despair before you know it."

The woman with the chainsaw had smiled, then.

'She lied. If what I feel now is despair, then how can this island—this disgusting, empty world—get rid of it? Unless you got lucky—'

At that point, he sank even deeper.

'Luck, huh.'

He found himself rejecting his own life.

'Ah...I see.

'She must have meant...that people who despair die before you know it.'

He was gripped by the mistaken notion that that was the truth of the universe. With nothing to acknowledge or argue that idea, Nejiro sat there and eventually gave up on thinking.

How many more hours had passed?

He heard something.

It sounded like something was crawling through a vent.

"...?"

Was it a rat, he wondered, and turned his attention away—

But then, the grate on the vent began to rattle. Rusted metal screeched as it was pushed outside.

Soon, a small figure poked its head out of the vent. A moment later, the light the figure was holding shone blindingly in the space.

"Ugh..."

It was much too bright for Nejiro, who had spent so long in the darkness.

He shut his eyes without thinking—when a shocked voice echoed from overhead.

"Oh...oh no! Are you all right?!"

The figure was a girl, slightly younger than he was. He remembered hearing her voice on the radio a few days earlier.

"...Are you..."

The girl in light blue clothing had dark skin for a child on the island, and had a notepad labeled 'Map #34' around her neck.

"...Yua Kirino...?"



The girl who was recording every last corridor on the island to create a complete map of the city. The girl who had followed her parents to the island, only to be left orphaned.

They were so very similar, but she had chosen a completely different life.

"Oh, yes! ...B-but before that...we have to get you to a doctor!" She cried, panicking at the sight of Nejiro's wounds, but he didn't care.

There was nothing waiting for him outside. Fate had a cruel sense of humor, sending him help just as he wished for death.

But if he told her to leave him, she would obviously call for help. And it didn't seem like she would understand his thought process even if he explained.

But then he remembered something.

'If I'm going to die, I might as well be killed by the other Rats.'

They must hate him now for his betrayal, he thought. And he would be killed by them. That must be his responsibility and repentance, he assumed.

"I'm going to tell you where to go. There's some other kids there who use that place as a hideout. I'll give you a few names...so if you're going to call someone, call them."



Hours passed, and several children came to Nejiro's side.

"Nejiro."

"It's Nejiro."

They mumbled mechanically. Nejiro looked at them feebly.

"...Hey there," he whispered in the dark.

There were about six boys and girls from the Rats. Noting that he knew them all, Nejiro breathed a sigh of relief.

"...Thank you. I'm not going to make excuses, and I'm not going to resist. Although I couldn't, even if I wanted to."

The children exchanged glances.

"Nejiro, is it true you betrayed us?"

"Did you?"

"Did you sell us out?"

"To the Eastern District?"

"Did they give you money?"

'As if you guys need to ask...'

Nejiro chuckled bitterly, but now that he had given up on life there was nothing to hesitate about.

"I betrayed you."

He paused, then, and drove in the final nail in the coffin. To provoke the others to fury.

"That's right, I betrayed you! I made a deal with the Eastern District to sell you out! So I could escape! You guys might have died—no, I was *sure* you'd have died! I was wrong, but I still tried to kill you! Are you happy now?!"

Tired, he hung his head.

With his eyes shut, he waited for the children to react.

But not in his wildest dreams did he expect their response.

"...So?"

"...Huh?" He intoned.

"What are we supposed to do?"

"What are we supposed to do to you, Nejiro?"

"Tell us."

"You always tell us what to do."

Nejiro was confused.

"What do you mean? ...Don't you hate me? Just do whatever makes you feel better..."

The children exchanged glances, then replied mechanically.

"We don't know much about that stuff."

"We know betrayal is bad. We know we're supposed to get angry. But we don't feel like doing anything to you, Nejiro."

"That's not important. We can't figure out how to eat."

"It's so hard without you. We don't know how to live."

Such mechanical words.

The moment he heard their emotionless words, he realized something. For the first time, he looked at them objectively and noticed something.

He had thought that the other children were suppressing their emotions, just like him.

But he now knew that they had no emotions to suppress.

No joy, no sadness, no anger or rage or greed—not even the instinct to live.

Nothing would change now.

'These guys...no...it's all of us...'

Ironically enough, it was the very same thing Misaki Yasojima had said earlier—but Nejiro did not know that.

'There's no one more like this island than us.'

He had ended up creating them. He had ended up creating and raising a part of the island.

He was the one who created the Rats.

Whatever the form it took, Nejiro himself was the one who had created this part of the island—the part that was most like the island. In other words, he was now one with this world.

'Even if I escape from this island, I'm already just a part of it.'

No matter where he went, even if he forgot the island, so long as the Rats existed—

At that moment, Nejiro knew that he could no longer escape.

As he sat in silence, the other children spoke, one by one.

"It doesn't matter. Without you, we can't survive on this island."

"Two of the kids look like they're gonna starve to death."

"Teach us how to live. So we can properly get revenge on you."

"That's our revenge."

"It is."

"I don't know what revenge really means, though."

"It's probably the right thing to do."

"Yeah."

"It must be."

A series of soulless words. Hearing their voices, not a single one containing a speck of emotion, Nejiro realized what he should do.

He would return what he had taken from them—their lost emotions. He would turn them back to normal.

By the time that idea took root, his wish to die had disappeared from his thoughts.

Inwardly, Nejiro smiled.

He just put on a quiet smile.

He tried to put that smile to his lips, but he struggled in vain.

Forcing his lips into an awkward curve, he spoke to the children.

"Say..."

"Hm?"

"I...did something wrong."

He could feel his voice tremble.

He could feel something rising from his throat.

But he did not stop. He continued to force the words from his mouth.

"Humans are so strong...especially the ones that live on this island."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"If Nejiro says so."

"Then it must be right."

'No one can break our bonds.

'Not the sharpest swords, not the strongest chainsaws.

'Because you can't break something that never existed to begin with.'

He sobbed.

How many years had it been since the last time he shed tears?

How many years had it been since he had shown such powerful emotion?

He had forgotten how to smile, but he remembered how to cry.

And he realized something. That the face he wore now was his first outburst of emotion since the day he set foot on the island.

That his fear at losing sight of his parents had left him sobbing until his tears ran dry, just like he was now.

Was he crying because of anger, or something else?

But he knew one thing for certain.

How lucky he was to have been found by Yua.

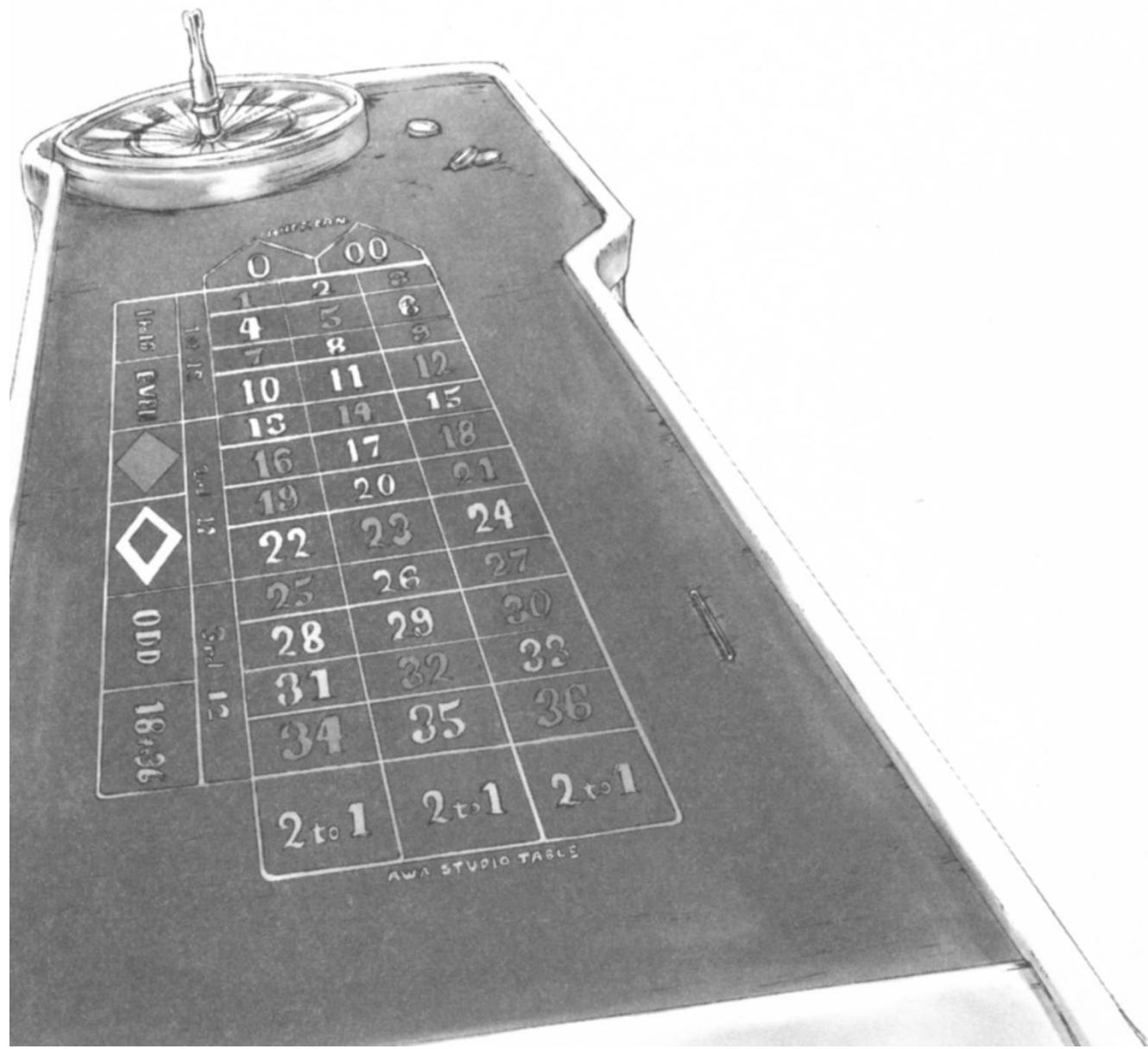
And so, he decided to teach his fellow Rats.

About the grief and joy contained in his tears.

That hope did indeed exist on the island.

余 章

『大山 勇助 しで風一四』



Epilogue: Making a Mountain out of a Mousehole

In the VIP room below the casino sat a man and a woman.
It was a perfectly private place, with no guards posted inside.
Holding playing cards in their hands, they held a personal conversation.

"It looks like he got away."

"I suppose so. Corpses don't rot that quickly."

Not meeting each other's eyes, they spoke with their gazes locked on their hands.

"Say, were you actually *hoping* he would get away?" Asked the man.

"What are you suggesting?"

"You're the one who decided where to dispose of him."

"But did I have a reason to let him go?"

Rather than reply, the man gave a meaningful smile and moved on to a different topic.

"About your ex-boyfriend—looks like they're not going to prosecute. Are you hoping he'll come back to the island?"

"I do think he might make a useful subordinate."

"Maybe you thought the same about li'l Nejiro. If he survived, you'd take him in."

Instead of responding, the woman silently scrutinized her own cards. The man continued.

"Just a thought. It does bother me that my friends were killed. And...even if you and I forgive him, none of the other executives will."

"I haven't forgiven him, and I have no intention of doing so."

"...Do you intend to search for him?"

"Their hell has just begun. But there's nothing those children can do about that. They turned their world into that hell themselves," the woman noted, and revealed her hand.

A straight flush, one of the cards a Joker.

"Time means nothing to us," said the woman, "we will make them suffer as long as they can in their limited time—"

"You think the island's gonna last that long?"

"That's up to your people, isn't it?"

The man chuckled instead of replying, and dealt himself another hand.

The woman put a long pipe to her lips and replied with a puff of smoke.

"What do you plan to do with those rodents? You wouldn't let them go for no reason."

"Does it really matter? They're Rats. They were born—no, created—to be experiments. I'm happy as long as they serve as tests subjects that show how the island's future—the children born and raised on this island—will turn out."

The woman shot him a disgusted look.

"...You really are a despicable man."

"Which is why I love the island so much."

Slowly, the man laid out his cards and flipped them over one at a time.

An astoundingly flawless no pair.

"...Because there's nowhere else I can exist."



It was business as usual in the Eastern District that day.

'I knew it I knew it I knew it! I was born under an unlucky star.'

A thug held a knife to Misaki's throat and demanded the casino's profits.

It was a 'peaceful' sight common anywhere on the island.

For them, things were returning to normal.

Meanwhile at the theme park office, Guard Team members with too much time on their hands were engaged in a heated debate.

"So Jun, who'd you admire most?"

"Umm! I admire the boss, but...oh! Tom Comet, no question."

"...Who?" Carlos wondered. Jun sounded exasperated.

"...Well, umm...he's a really cool man who can juggle three chainsaws...and he can shave people with a chainsaw, too..."

"What kinda creep shaves people with chainsaws? And what kinda creep agrees to get shaved like that?" Zhang sighed.

"Jun. That attitude of yours is why you lost Kanashima."

"...I'm sorry."

Ultimately, Jun was unable to finish Kanashima.

She had cut him from prosthetic arm to neck, landing a chest wound, but it was not a lethal blow.

Throwing his own spurting blood at Jun to blind her, Kanashima had run off into the underground space without even pausing to pick up his hand or his gun.

"I told you, you don't need to apologize about that one," Zhang grumbled. At that moment, the phone rang.

The woman in bondage gear picked up the receiver, and paled as she turned to Jun.

"This is bad! A man with a knife barged into the casino—"

"Leave it to the casino people. Inamine's got a gun," Zhang waved off the alarm, but the woman shook her head.

"No! It turned out Amagiri was at the casino too, and he slaughtered the man and now he's trying to kidnap Misaki! Some of the Guard Corps happened to be there, so they're buying us time!"

"Amagiri...Yakumo Amagiri?"

The legendary killer.

Zhang was on his feet before he knew it, and Carlos whistled at the name as he took out his gun. The office was instantly abuzz.

"Jun, take command and—"

But by the time Zhang turned, she was already gone.

The office door was wide open, and Jun's chainsaws were no longer on her desk.

Preparing her chainsaws, Jun sprinted for the casino.

Diving headlong into mortal peril to save her friend, she steeled herself.

It was not only Misaki. She would rush over anywhere to save anyone she could save.

As she headed underground, Kanashima's words echoed in her head.

"So you think of the engine as your father?"

"How unscientific."

'No. The soul can't answer for itself if it exists or not.'

'Only the humans who live in reality can give meaning to souls.

'That's why...I'm going to stake my pride on protecting this island.'

Driving resolve into her heart, she threw open the casino doors.

'I'll make sure that the engine—this island—one day has a soul!'

Brrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrm.

Without a second thought, she started the chains.

The howls of the engines and the cat shook the island.

Under the endlessly blue sky, the howl echoed into the distance.

As though blessing the island's growth with its piercing roar.

蛇足章
『じやれる男』



Snake Legs: The Man Playing Tricks

"Mr. Inui, was it?" The Japanese-looking man asked his new rainbow-haired acquaintance, who was going on at length about legends.

"Have you ever heard of the one legend over all legends?"

"Sounds interesting. What is it?"

"The legend of the one who ends a legend. You know how legends about dragons are overshadowed by legends of the knights who slay them? The more legends you finish off, the more legendary you become. Like Hercules, for example."

Rainbow-head thought for a moment. He soon nodded and took another sip.

"Ah, makes sense. ...Anyway, what're you doing here in Thailand?"

The Japanese man did not seem irritated at the sudden change of topic.

"I happened to lose all my wares and came back to restock."

"Huh...you a soldier or something? Those badass scars on your neck and arm, I mean. And you got a prosthetic right hand, too."

The Japanese man smiled affably.

"Hah hah. I toyed with a cat and got myself scratched."

"Hah! What kinda Smilodon did you tussle with?"

They spoke for some time afterwards, but eventually the Japanese man rose to leave. "Oh, right. Let me give you a bit of info to thank you for the stories."

He left an unusual comment as he departed.

"It'd be best if you stayed away from that island this winter."

"Say what now?"

"This time, I plan to wrestle a dog. No more holding back like with the kitten."

The sky in Thailand that summer day was endlessly blue.

The man with the rainbow-colored hair remembered the nostalgic blue sky he used to see from the island.

"Winter, huh."

Certain that the Japanese man was not a law-abiding one, Rainbow-head quietly emptied his glass.

"Damn. Now he's makin' me wanna go."

And, unable to contain his excitement, he muttered to himself.

"No. Now I *have* to go...right?"

His gaze fell on the blue sea.

And he clearly sensed the island that could not possibly have been on that horizon.

-To be continued?-



To be continued?

Afterword

Hello, everyone. First-time readers, it's nice to meet you. And to all the rest, it's been a while.

This book takes place in the same setting as my previous work, *Bow Wow!*. I made sure to make this story as self-contained as possible, but if you haven't read the previous book I highly recommend going back to read it.

The following section contains spoilers for this volume.

About sequel hooks.

I'm still just a newbie writer who's on his second year writing for Dengeki Bunko, but for the first time I've written a real sequel hook into the story.

Mew Mew!'s story is self-contained, of course, but this is the first time I've explicitly spelled out that there will be a sequel to a book I've written. I'm excited to see how people will react.

I was actually going to insert a subplot with Kuzuhara and Kelly (major characters from *Bow Wow!*) this time around, but as I was planning it in my head I concluded that it was too much plot for one volume, and before I knew it Kuzuhara made a grand total of zero appearances in this book.

Note my conversation with the illustrator, Mr. Yasuda.

Me: Yua might not show up in this volume...

Mr. Yasuda: Whaaat?! What about Kuzuhara?

Editor-in-chief: Don't worry, he's in this one.

Me: A-actually, he's not.

Editor-in-chief: Whaaat?! That's not how your outline went!

Me: Hah hah hah! Have any of my outlines ever made it to print intact?

Editor-in-chief: That's not something to be proud of.

I think that disqualified me from humanity, but things worked themselves out and this volume was finally completed. But I plan to make up for the lack of Kuzuhara and Kelly by making them part of the next ruckus. As supporting characters.

In conclusion, I'm hoping to publish the third arc of this series, *Garuguru!* (tentative title) sometime this winter. Please look forward to it!

The following section contains even more spoilers.

Chainsaws.

Chainsaws are not to be used to hurting people or for self-defense. Please don't try Jun's stunts at home or the workplace—or anywhere, really. Whew. Now I won't be held responsible even if someone gets into a chainsaw accident because of this book—er...anyway, the main character of this story is a chainsaw girl, whom I had a lot of fun writing.

At first I was worried that 'chainsaw girl' might not work as a character concept, but this exchange happened:

Me: Mr. Editor-in-chief, I'm thinking about making a cute girl the main character of the next story.

Editor-in-chief: How many times do I have to tell you that you don't need to worry about sales figures or *moe* or stuff like that? That's not your modus operandi.

Me: M-modus operandi? ...Anyway, I'm conceptualizing a girl protagonist whose best friend is a chainsaw.

Editor-in-chief: Approved!

Me: ...I know it's weird of me to ask, but what exactly do you mean by my modus operandi?

Anyway, this is how I received approval from the editorial department. I have even more quirky characters lined up for the story of the artificial island, and I hope I can show them off to my heart's content in the future.

I think I might have a preference for cute characters wielding scary weapons. I might try and make more characters in this style, so I hope I'll have your support.

As usual, below are some words of thanks.

I'd like to thank editor-in-chief Mr. Suzuki and Mr. Wada from the editorial department, for whom I cause nothing but trouble.

I'm grateful to the proofreaders and designers for making this book presentable, even as I constantly miss my deadlines.

I'm also grateful to the managing department, the publicity department, the publishing department, and everyone at Media Works.

I'd also like to thank my family, friends, and acquaintances, and everyone from S city.

I'm grateful to all the other Dengeki authors and illustrators who are always there to lend me a hand. Special thanks go out to fellow players of the Bow Wow! TRPG session for inspiring several characters—Mr. Masaki Okayu (Hikaru Inamine), Mr. Yuu Fujiwara (Yamato the transporter), Mr. Soichiro Watase (Grandpa G), and to Mr. Keiichi Sigsawa, for helping me take my profile picture.

To Mr. Suzuhito Yasuda, who accepts my crazy characters with a confident smile and comes up with the most incredible designs (especially with Nejiro). (I'd also like to congratulate his recent manga serialization!)

And finally, I'd like to thank all my readers.

I'm so grateful to you all.

May 2004, at home
With a badly injured back after attempting breakdancing swordsmanship,
inspired by *Samurai Champloo*

Ryohgo Narita



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